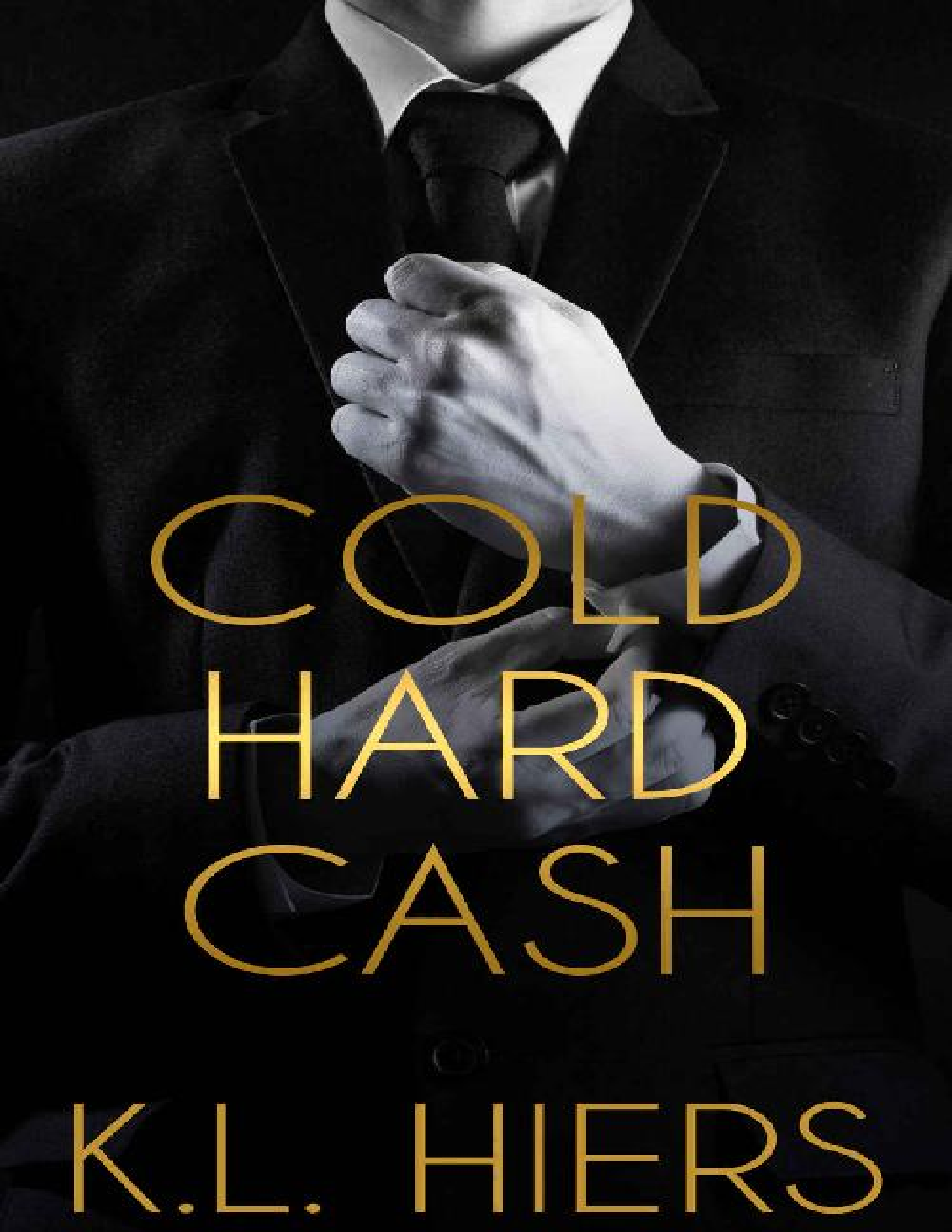

# COLD HARD CASH

K.L. HIERS

# Cold Hard Cash

By

K.L. Hiers

*OceanofPDF.com*

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# Chapter One

Eighty-six dollars and nineteen cents.

Jimmy Poe counted it all out, staring down at the money on his counter in dismay. It wasn't enough, not even close.

He'd lost his job at the grocery store that morning because he'd been over an hour late for the third time already that week. Sixteen out of the twenty days he was scheduled to work this month he'd either been late or called off.

Too many absences, too many tardies, his manager had told him. He was fired.

Jimmy had begged, desperate for one more chance. He'd been meeting with his father's attorney to hopefully get a new trial soon and lost track of time. It would never happen again, not ever, he'd pleaded.

His manager was not moved in the slightest, giving him his last check and quickly showing him the door. Defeated and sullen, Jimmy had cashed the measly check and returned home only to find more bad news awaited him.

Rent was overdue, had been for some time, and an eviction notice greeted him on his apartment door. He lightly banged his head against the frame, groaning loudly and fighting back a wave of tears. Today had easily been one of the worst days of his entire life.

And he still had one more errand to run, the worst one of all.

He had to go explain why he couldn't make a payment this month to his loan shark. Considering he hadn't paid last month, well, he didn't expect the conversation to go very well.

Now, staring at his eighty-six dollars and nineteen cents, he sighed miserably, then looked about his tiny apartment with a sad frown. He'd already pawned anything of value weeks ago to buy groceries. He didn't even own a television anymore, much less a cell phone. He'd checked his ratty sofa twice for loose change and even down in between the cushions of his recliner.

He was so fucked.

Jimmy scraped the money off the counter, every last penny, and carefully tucked it all away into his pocket. Taking a deep breath, he headed out to see Maury, praying he'd find him in a generous mood.

Maurice Martine was a shark with a legendary reputation. Maury the Mouth, people called him, known for being quite chatty and for his long, wide lips. Once upon a time, he'd also been known to be pretty fierce with a crowbar if payment didn't arrive in a timely manner.

In his golden years now, he was a tad tamer, and Jimmy had known him since he was a child. Maury was still a bit rough around the edges, but he was the only friend Jimmy had.

Maury had been the only one to support him after his father was arrested, the only other person who believed he was innocent.

It was a shock to find Maury nearly in tears and wringing his hands when Jimmy arrived at his downtown pawn shop. "Hey, kid. We gotta talk."

"Look, I know I'm a tiny bit behind," Jimmy said, biting his lip anxiously, "but I can give you like twenty bucks? Maybe thirty? I've just gotta make sure I can get some ramen or something while I look for another job and—"

"Thirty bucks? Come the fuck on, kid!" Maury groaned, smacking Jimmy upside the back of his head. "You're supposed to pay me a grand a month! Thirty is a fuckin' joke!"

"Ow!" Jimmy yelped, rubbing his scalp where Maury had popped him. He pouted, protesting, "Hey, I'm really trying!"

"Listen, kid," Maury said, still visibly upset. "Listen fuckin' good. Cold's bought me out. The whole block. I can't... I can't gives you no more extensions. He wants his money, and he wants it now."

Jimmy's eyes widened, his breath seizing in his throat.

Roderick Legrand—Cold.

Better known as Boss Cold, a mob ruler who owned practically every inch of Strassen Springs. Ruthless, savage, and too smart for the cops to ever pin

anything on him, whether drugs, gambling, whatever. If it was illegal, it didn't happen within city limits without his blessing.

"But... it's..." Jimmy gawked, quickly doing the math in his head. "I owe you over a hundred thousand dollars! I-I don't have it! You've been letting me make payments for months! I've been trying!"

"No, kid." Maury shook his head, sighing heavily. "Try a quarter of a million bucks. Cold's hit all outstanding accounts with a penalty. You gotta pay up, or he's gonna start breaking bones. Okay?"

Jimmy felt faint, his head shaking frantically. "I don't... I don't have anything." Tears were fighting to escape as he collapsed on Maury's rickety sofa and held his face in his hands. Despair was taking over, a breath away from sobbing as he gasped, "I already sold my car last year, I just lost my job, I'm about to be evicted from my apartment. I don't even have a hundred dollars to my name. I have absolutely nothing."

Maury twisted his fingers anxiously, saying, "Well... there is something."

"What?"

"How much do you know about Boss Cold?"

"Not much," Jimmy said, wiping at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Uhhh... he was a captain in the Luchesi family, that's when he got the nickname Cold. Then he broke off and started his own gang, ran the Luchesis all off, took over."

"And?"

"I haven't exactly looked him up on Wikipedia, Maury," Jimmy mumbled.

"He's gay," Maury whispered in a hushed tone, glancing around as if someone actually might be listening to their conversation. He looked triumphant, as if somehow this revelation solved the problem.

"So?" Jimmy held out his hands, not making the connection.

"So you're one of them multi-sexuals, right?"

Jimmy flushed, stammering, "Y-yeah, I'm bisexual, still not understanding what any of this has to do with me owing Boss Cold an absurd amount of

money.”

Maury came over and sat down next to Jimmy, the sofa squeaking in complaint from the added weight. “There’s a rumor, okay, that Cold will let people work off their debt,” he said excitedly. “You get me?”

Jimmy stared dumbly, his brows furrowed in confusion.

“You work it off by gettin’ him off, okay?”

“Oh, God! No!” Jimmy was instantly aghast, shaking his head. What Maury was suggesting was prostitution. He felt dirty all over even thinking about it. “I-I can’t do that!”

“Kid, you’re real pretty, and right now that’s the only fuckin’ thing you got goin’ for you. When Cold’s people come lookin’ for their money, I gotta know what to tell them.”

“You tell them, you tell them to give me more time!” Jimmy pleaded, reaching for Maury’s hands. “Please, Maury. I can’t, I can’t whore myself out like that. Crap, I just... I can’t do it.”

“Kid, this is probably your only chance,” Maury insisted, patting Jimmy’s hand. “I’ve known your family a long time. Your old man used to fix up my kids whenever they had a runny nose or a fever, wouldn’t take a dime. That’s s’why when you came to me for help, I helped, but—”

“Then help me now!” Jimmy cried, frantic and angry.

“I fuckin’ can’t help you no more,” Maury snapped, frustrated. “This is gonna end one of two ways, kid. Either on your back in Cold’s bed or on your back in your fuckin’ coffin.” He stood up, brushing away Jimmy’s hands, snorting, “You pick.”

Eighty-six dollars and nineteen cents.

Jimmy kept counting it out in his head, sniffing softly. “I don’t know, I just... I don’t know what to do.”

Maury clapped a comforting hand on Jimmy’s shoulder, his long mouth twisting up into a smile. “Hey, look. I’ll... I’ll try talkin’ to ‘em. Maybe I’ll tells ‘em you’ve gone all mentally irregular and can’t pay or somethin’.”

“Thanks,” Jimmy mumbled, laughing half-heartedly. “I appreciate that.”

“Keep your fuckin’ thirty bucks, go get a good meal,” Maury suggested. “I’ll come see you if I hears anythin’.”

“Thanks, Maury,” Jimmy said, getting to his feet and pulling Maury into a tight hug.

“Take care of yourself, kiddo,” Maury sighed, slapping Jimmy’s back and affectionately patting his cheek as they parted. “I’ll sees ya ‘round.”

Jimmy bid farewell and started back home, his head hanging low. Maybe he’d treat himself to pizza, something good for his last meal since Boss Cold was probably going to murder him soon. He laughed miserably to himself. This day had gone from bad to worse to an absolute nightmare in only a few hours.

He tried to stay optimistic. After all, nothing else could possibly happen, right?

Fumbling for his keys as he walked down his hall, he soon realized he didn’t need them. His front door was already open, stopping him in his tracks with his pulse beginning to thump in his ears.

Crap.

He slowly walked through the open doorway, gasping when he saw a strange man on his sofa. He had certainly seen the man’s picture on the news before, recognizing him in an instant.

“Hello there, James Poe. I don’t have a habit of making house calls,” Boss Cold rumbled, his voice a deep purr, “but I was reviewing my latest acquisitions and considering the amount of your outstanding balance... mmm, I felt it required a personal visit.”

Jimmy clutched his keys to his chest, staring dumbly in terror.

Roderick Legrand, Boss Cold, was stretched out across Jimmy’s couch with his feet kicked up over the back, his arms tucked behind his head. He wore a dark blue three-piece suit, a long navy blue trench coat, and black leather gloves. His shoes were expensive, his tie was definitely silk, and a long scarf was woven around his neck.

Cold looked like a napping cat, relaxed but every muscle was a bundle of coiled danger, ready to strike at any second.

Dangerous, and wow, beautiful. His lips were made for sin, and those eyes of his were sure to kill Jimmy quicker than anything. They were so blue and piercing that Jimmy felt sure the gangster could count the pennies in his pocket right through the denim.

“Uhhh,” Jimmy sputtered, his keys jingling in his nervous hands. Cold’s mugshots did him a great disservice. He didn’t think he had seen anyone that was so handsome in person. Maybe on television or on a magazine cover, but not face to face, not right there on his sofa. “I... uhh...”

Cold glanced around, giving Jimmy a reprieve from his icy gaze, musing, “Can’t imagine that you’ll be able to make a payment today, and after a quick little look around? I already know you don’t have anything to offer as collateral. I imagine whatever you had of value is in Maury’s pawn shop, mm?”

“Look, uh, Mr. Cold, sir?” Jimmy began. “Listen. I’ve been having a really, really bad day. And you don’t care, right, I totally get that. But please. I just lost my job today, and, and I’ve been really trying—”

The floor creaked behind him.

“Allow me to introduce you to my associate,” Cold chirped, cocking his head to the side as he looked over Jimmy’s shoulder. “This is Julian Price. Jules, this is Mr. Poe. Say hello.”

A giant hand curled around the back of Jimmy’s neck and he gasped softly, a deep voice greeting in an all too friendly tone, “Hi.”

Jimmy squeaked quietly in panic, smiling stupidly as he turned his head to gaze up into the terrifying visage leering over him.

Jules Price, Cold’s top enforcer and living proof that Bigfoot did exist and had consummated with humans.

Today sucked so much.

“Jules?” Cold said, his tone far too cheerful. “Will you please give Mr. Poe some encouragement to be a bit more timely with his payments?”

“Gladly,” Jules grunted, his fingers tightening and dragging Jimmy toward the stove.

Jimmy was helpless in Jules’ iron grip and he was certain that kicking and struggling would be utterly useless. But damn if he didn’t try anyway. Especially when Jules lit the stove and got the burner going.

Jules was going to burn him. He was going to freaking burn his hand!

“Wait, wait, please!” Jimmy screamed, wiggling frantically as he tried to pull his hand out of Jules’ giant paws.

Cold watched impassively, not affected by Jimmy’s cries. He glanced at his nails as if debating the merits of a manicure. He was so very handsome; a total and complete bastard, but an especially attractive one.

Jimmy was desperate, and he definitely did not want Jules Price to burn his hand or any other part of his body. He had no job, no money, and he was all out of options.

His body really was all he left.

“Wait!” Jimmy shouted, snapping his head around to look at Cold. “We, we can work something else out!”

“I’m afraid we’re far, far past that point,” Cold drawled, bored. “Empty promises don’t have any cash value, Mr. Poe. Take your punishment like a good boy, and—”

“Me! You can have me!” Jimmy yelled when he felt the heat of the flame warming up the tips of his fingers. “I’ll get you off, I’ll freakin’ get you off, please, I’ll do whatever you want!”

Cold’s brow arched curiously, calling out, “Jules, hold up.”

Jules pouted but pulled Jimmy’s hand back. Jimmy had never seen someone look so disappointed before.

Cold slowly swung his legs off the sofa in one fluid motion, his feet hitting the carpet as he rose to approach and strolled over to Jimmy with a strange smirk playing over his lips. He came close, so close that Jimmy could smell his cologne and see the splash of silver glittering through his dark hair.

“I’ll... I’ll do whatever you want,” Jimmy offered nervously, fingers clenching and unclenching by his sides.

“Whatever I want?” Cold echoed.

“Maury said... uh, that maybe, you’d be interested...?” Jimmy’s voice was almost a squeal, Jules’ forearm tightening around his neck. “That I could work off my debt... by... getting you off?”

Oh, Jimmy felt like a complete and total fool for saying it out loud. He couldn’t read Cold’s expression, not at all, and he could hear Jules chuckling faintly behind him. Maybe this was a mistake, maybe Maury was wrong.

“Tell me, Mr. Poe,” Cold purred, his eyes scanning over Jimmy’s body from head to toe, “do you want to... get me off?”

“I want to... do whatever keeps you from burning my fingers off,” Jimmy replied dumbly, not sure how to answer the question honestly.

“No, no, no,” Cold said, shaking his head, gesturing for Jules to release him. He slid his gloved fingers over the redness around Jimmy’s neck, lightly pressing down as he drew him close. His voice dropped even deeper, husky and seductive, slowly asking again, “Do you really... want to get me off?”

It wasn’t fair for anyone to sound that sexy, and Jimmy shivered all over from the cool leather touching his skin. Cold’s eyes were so pretty, and that smirk stretching out his lips was downright wicked. Of all the mob bosses in the world to give his body to, at least this one was ridiculously gorgeous.

Jimmy’s hands came up to instinctively rest on Cold’s wrists, and he nodded. “Yeah.”

Cold flinched at Jimmy’s touch, and Jules shifted uncomfortably behind him. Jimmy didn’t understand, but it felt like he had done something wrong. Cold didn’t move away, and Jules didn’t try to set him on fire again, so he remained as he was.

Cold leaned closer still, his eyes studying Jimmy’s lips while a gloved thumb slowly traced over his chin.

Lashes fluttering as his heart thumped heavily in his chest, Jimmy inhaled sharply. He didn't know how to define this feeling, but the way Cold held his neck, firmly yet so tenderly, was making his knees weak.

Jimmy couldn't recall any other time he had been so scared in his life. This man before him was a criminal, a murderer, and a monster. But there was something electric burning between them, a sensation that sent warmth down below his belt and made his mind glaze over. He was completely captivated, the adrenaline rushing through him causing every inch of his body to tingle in anticipation.

Jimmy didn't know what was crazier; that Boss Cold might be about to kiss him, or that he actually wanted him to.

"Let's have a little chat, Mr. Poe," Cold said, breaking the spell as he released him and strolling back into the living room. He beckoned Jimmy to follow with a finger, Jules grabbing him by his shoulders and pushing him along.

"Here's the deal," Cold announced, stretching across the sofa like before, his feet now finding their place on the coffee table. "Because I am such a benevolent criminal, I've decided to accept your offer. Let's say, eight hours a night? From nine o'clock in the evening until five o'clock in the morning you will belong to me. Since you told me that you lost your job, I'm sure you have oodles of free time."

Shoved down into the recliner by Jules, Jimmy stared awkwardly at Cold as he listened to his demands. His pulse was still racing away, but it was easier to stay focused when the gangster wasn't so close. "O-okay."

"For services rendered, I will pay you ten thousand dollars a night," Cold continued, a smug smirk playing over his lips. "If you happen to exceed my expectations, I reserve the right to give you a bonus. Let's say, another five thousand? But, should you be disappointing or displease me at any time, I will end the deal and penalize you another hundred thousand dollars."

Jimmy thought he might throw up. What the fuck was he getting himself into? This was a huge risk. Even if he managed to please Cold every night, it would take almost a month to pay off what he owed. And if he screwed up? He'd be ruined, and Jules would certainly turn him into barbecue.

He anxiously rubbed a hand through his hair, nails scratching at the back of his neck. “What... what uh, what do you want me to do?”

“Whatever I want,” Cold drawled, laughing softly. “That’s what you offered, remember? I can promise you that I won’t do anything that would cause any lasting damage... but remember, you must obey my every order, or the deal is off.”

Jimmy licked his lips, wishing he could see another way to get himself out of this. He had no idea what a man like Cold might ask of him, but he had to accept the risk. He had no other choice. “When do you want me to—”

“Tonight,” Cold replied immediately. “Think of it... as a test run. Take you for a spin before I decide to buy.” He stood up, gracefully strolling over to Jimmy and handing him a small business card. “Here.”

It was for the Wynne Hotel, a large and swanky establishment downtown. “At the desk, ask for Thomas Frost’s room. They’ll send you right up.” He stroked a gloved hand over Jimmy’s cheek, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he said, “Nine o’clock. Don’t be late.”

Jimmy could only nod, staring up at the beautiful gangster as he pulled away, him and Jules departing. The door shut and even though Jimmy was expecting it, the sound still made him jump.

“Holy crap,” he said, panting erratically. He was still full of adrenaline and had nowhere to put it, getting to his feet and starting to clean the apartment. He matched socks and folded his threadbare towels; he washed dishes and scrubbed his counters. He couldn’t sit still, collapsing back in his recliner and cradling his face when he was finally exhausted.

He started doing the math in his head again, rubbing the back of his neck.

Jimmy owed over two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

At ten thousand dollars a night, that meant at least twenty-five nights, probably twenty-six, to completely clear his debt.

The bonuses would certainly help, but God knew what it would take to earn one. He had to worry about pleasing Boss Cold and obeying his every order without having any idea what might be asked of him. He should assume the

worst, but Jimmy was actually intrigued. He'd never been brave enough to be very adventurous in the bedroom before.

Maybe this would be educational, he tried to tell himself hopefully. Maybe he would even enjoy it. He hadn't had a boyfriend or a girlfriend in a very long time. The company of his own hand had been the only outlet for stress relief for a while now.

Although intimidating, Cold was very handsome, and Jimmy caught himself wondering what could be hiding under all those layers of clothing. He'd find out soon enough, daydreaming about rippling pecs and washboard abs. He used his precious eighty-six dollars and nineteen cents to order a small pizza, the highlight of a very crappy day, leaving him with fifty-six dollars and eighty-four cents to get a cab downtown.

Even though working for Cold was going to take care of his debt to him, it still wasn't going to feed him or pay his rent. He had to find another job. Gobbling up the pizza, he flipped through the classifieds in search of employment. As a college drop-out with a checkered job history, his prospects were limited to retail and customer service. He began to lose track of the time, making a list of stores to visit tomorrow and hopefully find a place that would be willing to pay him in advance.

By the time he looked at the clock, it was already a few minutes past eight.

"Ohhh, fuck," Jimmy moaned in frustration. He had to get ready, anxiously hurrying to his room to change clothes. He thumbed through his closet, trying to decide what to wear.

Was this like a date? Should he dress up a little? What was the appropriate attire to go have sex with a mob boss to settle a debt?

He picked out the nicest shirt he owned, a simple button-up in a rich red that he'd always been told was his color. He switched between a few different pairs of jeans until he settled on one that fit his long legs well. He was digging through his shoes when it suddenly struck him that whatever he wore probably didn't matter. After all, it was all going to end up on the floor, wasn't it?

Sighing, he pulled on his old faithful black sneakers and grabbed his jacket as he rushed out the door. He hailed a cab and promised a big tip if they could get to the Wynne Hotel before nine. He had to hurry, his palms already sweating and his stomach turning somersaults the entire way.

One thing he was certain of was that Boss Cold would not appreciate tardiness.

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# Chapter Two

Jimmy's stomach dropped to his feet as he rode the elevator up to the executive level of the Wynne Hotel. The receptionist had given him a skeptical look when he asked for access to Mr. Frost's room, but she passed him a keycard without question. Tapping his foot anxiously as the floors dinged by, he took a deep breath when the doors finally opened.

There were several large men in suits blocking the hallway, every one of them staring him down as he stepped off the elevator. They did not look friendly.

Jimmy was struck by a bolt of panic. He started to back away, but the elevator doors had already closed behind him. Gulping, he tried to appear as small and as unthreatening as possible while all the blood in his body rushed to his face, and he waved shyly. "Uh, hi."

"Better hurry up," the familiar voice of Jules Price rumbled. "Boss ain't gonna be happy if you're late."

"Yeaaaah." Jimmy gulped, bravely taking a few steps forward. He didn't know what time it was, but he knew he had to be cutting it close. "Hey, Mr. Price."

Jules lumbered out from the ranks of his fellow suited giants, grinning in an unnaturally friendly way. He waved back and even offered a cheerful greeting, "Good to see you again, Twig. Miss me?"

"Yeah, I always love seeing people who tried to burn me," Jimmy mumbled, regretting his retort immediately. He attempted a sweet smile, hoping the giant man had a sense of humor.

To his relief, Jules laughed. Jimmy did not.

"Hey, ain't nothin' personal," Jules said, leering smugly, "just business." Nodding at two of the men, he commanded, "Search him."

Jimmy didn't protest as he got patted down roughly, Jules giving him a crooked smile.

“Can’t be too careful.”

“Right.”

“You be sure to show the boss a real nice time,” Jules teased, winking lecherously as the other men chuckled amongst themselves.

Jimmy’s face was suddenly too hot, and he wished he could melt into the floor. He practically sprinted to the door when they released him, using the key to slip inside and shut it quickly.

The room was dimly lit, the air much cooler inside than out in the hall, and it felt good on his blushing face. He saw Cold sitting at a large desk, the only light in the room emanating from a small lamp behind him.

Cold wore a gray sweater that hung nicely on his broad shoulders, the snug fit revealing a much more trim physique than Jimmy had first suspected. He was also surprised to see a thin pair of black reading glasses perched on Cold’s nose as he worked on several thick ledgers spread in front of him. He appeared relaxed and made no effort to acknowledge Jimmy’s presence.

“Good evening,” Jimmy said quietly, not sure how to proceed.

“Bathroom is around the corner,” Cold informed him shortly, not even looking up from the sea of papers. “Shower, and then put on the robe hanging on the back of the door.”

“I-I took a shower this morning,” Jimmy protested weakly, gulping audibly as he quickly added, “Sir.”

Cold sighed softly, obviously annoyed. He took off his glasses and set down his pen, finally lifting his head to stare Jimmy down.

Jimmy froze under the icy gaze, immediately understanding how the mob boss had earned his name. His eyes were piercing, and he was certain they were going to drill holes right through him. He felt trapped, glued to the spot, and he couldn’t look away.

“Allow me to make myself very clear, Mr. Poe,” Cold said slowly, speaking as if Jimmy was a child. He steepled his fingers together, his eyes never leaving Jimmy’s as he went on. “I have been kind enough to offer you this

little arrangement to take care of your debt. I expect to get my money's worth, and—"

"I'm sorry, really, I just have this weird thing about showering in other places that aren't my house? And—"

Holding up a finger for silence, Cold's eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. His entire posture had shifted, tense and ready to strike.

Jimmy shut up immediately.

"Last chance," Cold warned quietly. "For the next seven hours and fifty seven minutes, you are mine. Your body is my property. You will do whatever I ask of you without hesitation. Please me, and I will ask you to return again. But if you fail to do so and you waste my time, I will make sure you'll regret it."

Jimmy believed him.

"Now," Cold sighed, attempting to relax again, "any questions?"

A thousand questions came rushing to the surface, but only one managed to make it all the way to Jimmy's lips, stammering, "D-do you do this a lot? Let people, you know, do this to pay you?"

Cold looked surprised, an expression Jimmy felt certain he did not show often. It faded as quickly as it appeared, and he answered simply, "No."

Jimmy waited for more detail, but decided none was coming when Cold resumed his paperwork. He obediently hurried to the bathroom, grateful he could shut the door and have a moment of privacy.

Holy crap. He was in Roderick Legrand's private room, and they were gonna do stuff. Sex stuff. He knew it was rather juvenile and this whole situation was insane, but his imagination was running through all sorts of debauched fantasies. It wasn't so wrong if he was looking forward to this, he decided. He was making the best of the hand he'd been dealt.

After taking a deep breath, he stripped off his clothes. He didn't want to keep Cold waiting.

Showering quickly and using the products he found in the bathroom, he hopped in and out as fast as he could. He pulled the robe on, grateful for the thick fabric when he stepped back into the cool main room.

“Bed,” Cold said, his pen still moving and eyes on the papers before him. “Get... comfy.”

Jimmy did as he was told, stretching out across the massive bed and sighing happily. It was easily the most comfortable bed he’d ever been in, and he sighed luxuriously as he snuggled up against the pillows. He knew better now than to speak, waiting patiently for Cold to tell him what to do.

“Go ahead and get yourself ready for me,” Cold continued briskly. “You’ll find what you need in the bedside table drawer.”

Jimmy quirked his brows, rolling over to inspect the contents of the drawer. He blushed immediately, finding a bottle of lube and several dildos. He was relieved to see they were at least new and still in the package. That was considerate of him, Jimmy thought, as he nervously grabbed the lubricant and one of the smaller toys.

Cold’s eyes flicked up for a moment, smirking at his selection. He said nothing, returning to his work.

Jimmy didn’t understand what was so amusing; the smallest toy was still at least seven inches. He set the toy and lube aside for now, slouching down so his head was nestled in the pillows. He tried to relax, letting his eyes close and quickly running his hands down his chest. Untying the robe, he opened it up to expose his lean body, still damp from the shower.

His cock was vaguely interested, half hard against his thigh as Jimmy’s hands moved across his stomach. He began to massage his balls while he started jerking himself off, trying to get hard. He was nervous, his cock not wanting to fully cooperate and his stomach turning uncomfortably.

He didn’t know if he could do this. What the fuck was he thinking? This was all a mistake. Cold was going to get pissed off, and then he was going to let Jules Price burn him to a crisp, he just knew it.

Jimmy didn’t notice that Cold’s pen had stopped scratching until he heard a low growl. “Slower.”

His eyes snapped open, turning his head to meet Cold’s unrelenting gaze. He obeyed, his pace dropping down immediately. Even though the friction had lessened, his cock was now at strict attention. There was something about that growl, about how Cold was looking at him...

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy found himself replying, spreading his legs wide. He stroked himself a few more times before reaching for the lube, slicking up his trembling fingers. He remembered to take his time, reaching down between his thighs to tease over his entrance.

He shuddered; the lube was cold and his body instinctively shied away from the sensation. He kept rubbing in delicate circles while it warmed up, one fingertip slipping inside prompting him to gasp.

It had been a very long time since he’d had sex, and even longer since he’d been with a man. He still enjoyed pleasuring himself like this when the mood struck him, and he tried to imagine he was at home in his own bed. There was no reason to rush. No one to please but himself, just him and his fingers chasing down waves of pleasure.

“Mmmmph,” he grunted as he pressed his finger all the way in, pumping slowly. He’d almost forgotten how good it was to feel so full, and this was far from over. In the back of his mind, he knew he was prepping himself for Cold’s cock, for Cold to be inside him, and he wanted it.

“Ohhh... mmm,” Jimmy moaned, rolling onto his side and pulling his knee up to his chest. He whined loudly, quickly reaching behind himself to slip two fingers back into his wet hole. The moist sounds his fingers made as he plunged in and out of himself were deliciously lewd, the squelching echoing throughout the large room.

Jimmy was almost flat on his stomach now, grinding his cock into the mattress. He was absolutely writhing, consumed by his own thrusting hand as his body opened up, trying to find the right angle to reach his prostate as he rubbed himself against the sheets.

Cold had silently moved to the foot of the bed, purring low, “Toy. Now.”

Jimmy panted, glancing up in surprise. He hadn’t even seen Cold move, but looked now to the dildo. Fuck, it wasn’t what he wanted, but he had to

obey. He grabbed it, squirting lube all over it and impatiently starting to shove it inside.

“Slowly,” Cold commanded again.

“But, sir!” Jimmy protested, desperate, trying to push the toy deeper. “I can take it, I can take it so good—”

“Stop,” Cold ordered sharply.

Jimmy moaned in frustration, his face flushed and burning. He reluctantly withdrew the toy, rolling onto his back with a pout.

“Come here, on your hands and knees,” Cold said, pointing at the edge of the bed.

Jimmy grunted, shrugging off the robe as he crawled over toward Cold. Gazing up at him, he licked his lips in anticipation of the next command. He didn’t know why, but he really liked this. He liked being told what to do.

He didn’t have to worry about his father, about the money he owed, or even when he was going to eat next. He could give himself over to that velvety voice and listen. All of his cares melted away, his only focus on following the next order.

“Turn around,” Cold said with a small smile, spinning his finger tauntingly.

Jimmy groaned softly, his already reddened face feeling hotter, turning as he was asked. He was so exposed, his ass now facing Cold, ducking his head down against the sheets. He should have been embarrassed, but he was excited. He was panting softly, his toes curling as adrenaline pumped through his body.

Feeling a cool finger slide between his cheeks, lightly teasing over his hole, he gasped softly. He tried to rock his hips back against it, eager for penetration.

“Mr. Poe,” Cold purred, his fingertip gliding around the rim of his ass, refusing to probe any deeper, “I do believe you need to be taught a lesson in obedience.”

“I’m sorry,” Jimmy whined, clawing at the sheets beneath him. “I just, I need—”

“Shh, shhh, shh.” Cold’s voice was almost soothing. He withdrew his finger and chuckled softly. “Don’t worry... You will learn.” Squeezing Jimmy’s cheeks, he suddenly reared back and cracked his palm across his ass.

“Fuck!” Jimmy yelped, the sting left behind unforgiving. He barely had taken a breath before another violent slap rocked his ass. “Oh, fuck,” he sobbed, his hands clutching at the mattress. He tried to pivot his body forward for a reprieve, but Cold grabbed his hip with his other hand to hold him firmly in place.

Over and over, Cold spanked him, Jimmy certain his ass was going to be bruised tomorrow. Panting as tears began to run down his face, he gritted his teeth to bear it. Cold was not holding back at all, and it hurt like hell.

Cold would pause for a few moments, silent except for his heavy breathing, almost tenderly rubbing over where his hand had just slapped before spanking Jimmy again. The pattern kept repeating, giving Jimmy only a few seconds to catch his breath in between slams, moaning and squirming.

“Now, when I tell you to do something, it is not a question, it is a command,” Cold scolded, giving him one final smack. “You will do it... yes?”

“I will, sir,” Jimmy gasped, his ass throbbing from the abuse. He could feel his pulse in each cheek and in his cock, mewling pitifully, “I swear, I will.”

“Otherwise, you’ll be punished again,” Cold warned softly, his hand gently rubbing over Jimmy’s raw flesh. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, fuck, I do,” Jimmy replied, wiping his tears off on the sheets, turning his head back to look up at Cold. “I understand, sir.”

“Now... the toy. Finish what you started, and perhaps I’ll let you come,” Cold taunted.

Jimmy’s eyes bugged out at that, his mind reeling. Being denied his orgasm had never occurred to him, and he whimpered at the thought. This was

torture—sweet, beautiful torture, and he quickly grabbed the dildo again. Rolling onto his back, he winced as his tender cheeks touched the mattress.

“Good boy,” Cold sighed, a breathy and pleased sound that made Jimmy shiver. “Now remember, slowly.”

Jimmy nodded, groaning as he pushed the toy inside him at the requested speed. Every inch made him gasp and cry out, sweat beading all across his forehead. The toy felt so much thicker than it had first looked and the angle was awkward. He took his time, managing to push it all the way in and slide it back out, fucking himself at a sluggish pace.

“There,” Cold praised, unbuttoning his pants and reaching down to touch himself as he watched Jimmy. “Just like that, Mr. Poe.”

Jimmy strained to look up at Cold, hopeful that he was about to start stripping and he would finally see what he looked like naked. But the mob boss did little more than open up the front of his pants, and that’s when Jimmy got the first glimpse of Cold’s cock.

“Oh, shit,” Jimmy cursed, his eyes wide in shock. Now he understood why all of the toys were so large, but still not a one could compare to what Cold had going for him.

“Oh, yes.” Cold actually grinned, that smug bastard, stroking his thick length as he watched Jimmy squirm. “Get back on your knees for me. Now.”

To say that Roderick Legrand had been blessed sounded too innocent and sweet; it didn’t quite capture the underlying terror of knowing that massive thing had to fit inside Jimmy’s ass.

Groaning as the toy slipped out of him, Jimmy scrambled to get back into position. He scooted backwards until he felt Cold’s hand stop him, sliding along his spine and pushing his head down. He could feel the warm head of Cold’s cock pressing against his thigh, and he closed his eyes while taking a long, deep breath.

He could hear the crinkle of a wrapper, a condom, and then Cold’s blunt fingers were probing at his hole.

“Mmmph, you’re still so tight,” Cold chuckled cruelly. “Maybe next time you’ll prep better.”

Jimmy gulped softly, moaning as Cold’s fingers sank into him. Next time, Cold had just said it. There was going to be a next time. That meant this was going well despite Jimmy’s previous infraction. He tried to relax as Cold fingered him roughly, tried to remind himself of what had brought him here.

Cold continued to tease and stretch out his hole, his long fingers playing in all the slick left behind from his earlier efforts. He finally seemed satisfied that Jimmy was ready, the head of his cock suddenly there in place of his fingers without warning.

The first sting of penetration took Jimmy’s breath away, trying to breathe through his nose and not scream. Cold was pushing and pushing and forcing Jimmy’s body to open up. He couldn’t hold back any longer, shouting as Cold slammed the last few inches of his thick cock inside him.

“Oh, God, fuck, fuck, fuck!” Jimmy cried, up on his elbows, trying to find any way to relieve the intense pressure.

“There you go,” Cold purred low, already beginning to move his body forward, thrusting deeply into Jimmy’s tight hole. “Just like that, Mr. Poe...”

Jimmy couldn’t find relief, Cold’s hands holding his hips in place and pulling him back to meet every savage slam. He whimpered and moaned, his eyes fluttering closed against the incredible sensations. The pain was intense, but pleasure was starting to lick its way up his spine, sending all the right signals to his brain to make his cock twitch.

It was starting to feel good.

Really good.

Jimmy had never felt so full, his body stretched to its very limit, and he sobbed almost hysterically against the mattress. He didn’t realize it at first, but Cold had been holding back. His thrusts were deep and mean, but there were a few precious seconds in between each one to let Jimmy prepare himself for the next.

Jimmy pushed up onto his hands and started to rock back on Cold's cock, grunting loudly for more, causing Cold to moan quietly, clearly pleased.

"Yes..." he growled. "Come on... you look so beautiful fucking yourself on my cock."

Whimpering and blushing at the nasty compliment, Jimmy continued to slam his hips back. Beautiful, Cold had called him beautiful. Then he soon realized that Cold was no longer moving. He was letting Jimmy control the pace. Eager to please, Jimmy threw his whole body into each thrust, taking every inch as he rocked back as hard as he could.

Cold allowed this to go on for several minutes, his hands squeezing Jimmy's hips and gently petting over his raw cheeks, making small noises of encouragement for his efforts. But soon enough, he was bored of it, and that was when he finally showed Jimmy how much he had been restraining himself.

His hips snapped forward brutally, immediately setting a rapid pace that pushed Jimmy's hips flat against the bed. He cried out, gasping as Cold pressed right on top of him, forcing his legs to spread as he slammed into him. Jimmy could only moan and sob, helpless to defend against such rough treatment.

No one had ever fucked Jimmy so hard before. Cold was using his body only for his own pleasure, growling as he took everything he wanted from Jimmy without mercy. The pain waxed and waned, mixed in with an alarming amount of ecstasy that Jimmy had never experienced. He submitted to Cold's cock pounding away at him, groaning as he gave himself over completely.

Cold was a quiet lover. He grunted, growled, maybe a soft moan here and there, but he gave little indication that he was enjoying himself. It wasn't until he started to get close that his breathing became labored and he grew louder. He cursed, his growls becoming stunted little roars, and he lifted a hand to slap Jimmy's already sensitive ass.

"Fuck!" Jimmy wailed, tearful again and exhausted. He didn't know how much more he could take, and Cold was seemingly relentless. Just as

Jimmy was about to start begging for leniency, Cold pulled out, leaving him raw and gaping, moaning pitifully.

“Roll over,” Cold croaked, ripping off the condom and jerking himself furiously.

Jimmy whimpered, struggling to comply, flopping onto his back.

“Finish yourself off, now,” Cold commanded.

Lost in Cold’s stern voice and intense gaze, Jimmy immediately reached down to touch his aching cock. It had been trapped beneath him against the sheets all this time, and he realized with a faint grimace that the moisture he felt under his back was from where he’d been leaking.

Taking a few deep breaths, he sniffed back his tears as he curled his fingers around himself. It only took a few tugs and he was coming, twitching and shouting as cum splattered across his stomach. He came so hard that it made his head throb from the rush, moaning, “Fuck... oh, fuck!”

Suddenly, Cold was right on top of him, and Jimmy groaned as he realized what he was doing. Cold was going to come on him.

Jimmy couldn’t look away from Cold’s hard and oozing cock, begging, “Please, come on, please, do it!”

Cold’s eyes widened ever so slightly, his brow furrowing in concentration. He let out one single gorgeous groan, loud and happy, and his cock pulsed long streams of cum all over Jimmy’s chest and stomach. It was hot and sticky, and Jimmy felt absolutely filthy.

He loved it.

Moaning quietly, Jimmy still trembled from the force of his orgasm, smiling stupidly up at Cold. It was that moment when he realized that he still had no idea what this man looked like naked. They hadn’t even kissed, his eyes zeroing in on those beautiful lips and wanting to know how they tasted.

Cold seemed to sense Jimmy’s desire, offering only a smirk as he moved away from the bed before Jimmy could find out. Carefully tucking himself away, Cold sighed loudly in satisfaction, but seemed to make it clear that Jimmy would not be getting the show he desired.

Jimmy threw his arm over his face and gave a sharp exhale. That had been intense. Really intense. He was sore all over, especially his poor butt cheeks. Stretching out his aching body across the bed, he still couldn't believe they hadn't kissed, not once, and made a mental note to remedy that on their next encounter.

Hearing the snap of a rubber band, Jimmy lifted his forearm to see Cold standing over him with a stack of cash. He grimaced when Cold started counting out the bills, letting them fall over his naked and sticky body. They were hundred dollar bills, he realized, a crazy part of his brain wanting to grab them immediately, but he waited.

He had to wait until Cold said he could move.

"Consider this a tip," Cold said with a shrug, smirking happily. "I've decided to officially accept your deal. You'll need to be here again tomorrow night. Nine o'clock."

Jimmy didn't move, but a quick glance at the cash scattered all over him definitely didn't seem like the agreed upon amount. "This isn't... ten thousand?"

"No, it's not," Cold snorted, his brows raised in amusement. "This was just a test run, remember? Think of it as an interview that went exceptionally well. I wasn't going to agree to buy the cow without tasting the milk first, Mr. Poe."

Jimmy's face flushed, his head dropping back against the pillows. He had honestly forgotten that tonight wasn't the official start of their arrangement.

"Besides, when and if you do earn your ten thousand dollars for a good night's work, did you really think that I was just going to give you cash?" Cold pursed his lips, apparently amused by the idea.

"Well... yes?"

"Cash that you would turn around and pay right back to me?" Cold said with a short laugh.

"When you put it that way, okay, yes, it's..." Jimmy closed his eyes and sighed in frustration. "Right. Got it."

“I think your track record proves that you’re not fiscally responsible,” Cold lectured, making one last adjustment to his sweater before walking back toward the desk. “I wouldn’t trust you not to waste it like you did all the rest of the money you owe me.”

“I didn’t waste it,” Jimmy protested softly.

Cold paused, huffing incredulously. “I’ve seen your apartment, Mr. Poe. Whatever you spent that cash on, it was definitely a waste because you have nothing to show for it.”

Those words cut deeper than Cold could ever know, Jimmy’s eyes instantly welling up with tears. The crime boss was right. Thousands upon thousands of dollars spent, and his father was still in jail. He sniffed quietly, rolling over onto his side, the crisp bills crunching softly as he moved.

“Can I go now, sir?” Jimmy asked, struggling to keep his voice from shaking.

“Is it five o’clock?” Cold asked sternly.

“No.”

“There’s your answer,” Cold replied flatly as he sat back down at his desk. “Get up. Take another shower. I may wanna fuck you again before you leave.”

Jimmy had to force himself to get moving, grabbing his robe and gathering up all the sticky bills. He wadded them into a bunch to take with him to the bathroom, shoving them into the pocket of the robe to count later. After shutting the door and getting the water going, he cradled his face in his hands and sobbed quietly. He collapsed on the floor by the tub, trying to keep his sounds of sorrow as discreet as possible.

His father was still rotting away in jail for a crime he didn’t commit, a fact that Cold had been kind enough to remind Jimmy of. He knew that Cold hadn’t meant to, but Jimmy had never felt more like a failure than right at that moment. He was no closer to freeing his father despite all the debt he had incurred, he hadn’t been able to keep a job for more than a few months, his bank accounts were all in the negative, credit cards maxed out, and his only friend was a crooked old loan shark.

He had literally just had sex for money with a ruthless criminal, his feelings even more conflicted about what he had done because while he felt completely filthy, he had enjoyed it. Every second of it.

And he already knew he was going to do it again. Again and again. Because right now, Roderick Legrand was the only hope he had of getting his life back on track. Ironic, really, since he was the one threatening Jimmy's life if he didn't pay up.

Jimmy sighed miserably, finally reaching into his pocket to dig out the cash, sniffling sadly as he thumbed through the bills. He frowned as he counted it. That couldn't be right. He counted it again.

"Holy shit," he breathed excitedly. It was sixteen hundred dollars.

Cold had tipped him sixteen hundred fucking dollars.

Jimmy was giddy. He started laughing, hugging the money tightly to his chest. He could buy groceries, real groceries. He could actually purchase fruit and vegetables and eat a real meal. He could finally pay his rent so he wouldn't be kicked out of his apartment.

Sure beat the hell out of the eighty-six dollars and nineteen cents he'd started the day with.

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# Chapter Three

Jimmy went back to Cold's bed after his shower, anxiously awaiting the gangster's return. The hours ticked by in silence, Cold working tirelessly at the stack of ledgers in front of him and not paying Jimmy a bit of attention.

Pulling the blankets up over himself, Jimmy stayed quiet and got comfortable. He didn't dare ask permission to watch television or even order room service as his stomach rumbled but spent his time looking around the room in search of any clues to the man he had chosen to fall into bed with.

He found very little.

The closet door was cracked and he could see several suits hanging, all still in plastic from the dry cleaners with several pairs of shoes neatly arranged on the floor.

There was a briefcase by the desk, black and sleek, but no personal markings. Probably where Cold kept all those books he was scribbling in.

*The ledgers*, Jimmy blinked as realization struck. That was why the cops couldn't get any evidence on Cold. He was too smart to use any traceable electronic activity to organize his illegal operations. He was old school, pen and paper. Those just weren't books, those were the foundation of the entire criminal empire that controlled Strassen Springs.

Feeling quite proud for putting all that together, Jimmy decided to keep that revelation to himself. It could just be a collection of crossword puzzles.

Jimmy snuggled into the pillows, trying desperately to stay awake. This was supposed to be his big debut to prove himself to Boss Cold. Though the mob boss had already told him that the deal was on, there were several hours left to play, and Jimmy had to admit that despite his aching body, he was looking forward to another round.

The bed was too warm, however, and the pillows too soft. Jimmy fell asleep while Cold was still working, snoring lightly as he tugged all the blankets all around him. At some point, he thought he felt the warmth of another

body next to him. Groggily, he reached toward it, his arm finding a firm chest and clinging to it. He cuddled close, sighing contently. It had been so long since he slept next to someone. He could have sworn there was a hand gently resting on his forearm, but he was probably dreaming.

Jimmy didn't wake again until there was a loud knock at the door. He felt sore but refreshed, stretching out his long legs with a groan, then frowned when he realized he was alone.

There was no sign of Cold, the briefcase and all the books were gone, and the clock at the bedside said it was a few minutes after nine o'clock.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Jimmy sat up. He stared at the door, hesitant to answer it. He was in Boss Cold's hotel room. There was no telling who it might be. The knocking had become relentless, and Jimmy finally stumbled out of bed to peer through the peephole.

It was an older woman, very distressed, with a cart full of silver-domed dishes.

Room service.

Food!

Jimmy opened the door, smiling brightly and greeting, "Good morning!"

"Good morning," the woman replied, clearly upset. "I am so, so very sorry I'm late, I really didn't mean any offense, I swear!"

"Late?" Jimmy frowned, confused. He glanced down the hallway, spying two members of Cold's burly entourage posted by the elevator doors. They smirked at him, but said nothing.

"Yes, I know how much Mr. Frost values punctuality, and I really tried to be here on time! I know he said to be here right at nine, but the kitchen—"

"Hey! It's okay, really!" Jimmy exclaimed, blinking rapidly. He wasn't awake enough to handle this much excitement and he opened the door to allow her inside. He looked at her name tag, quickly reading it and soothing, "Lola? Hey. I'm Jimmy. I promise, it's not a big deal."

“Oh, God! Thank you, thank you so much!” Lola was almost sobbing, quickly pushing the cart inside the room. She set up a folding tray by the edge of the bed and placed one of the smaller domes right in the center.

“Seriously, it’s really fine,” Jimmy comforted her. “Thank you so much.”

Lola wiped her eyes, smiling nervously as she gestured at the tray. “Here. Mr. Frost wanted you to have this first. You, you really need to look at this one first. If you don’t... well, if he asks, I told you to. Thank you, so sorry again, thank you.”

Jimmy was stunned. They both knew who Mr. Frost really was, and Lola was clearly terrified of him. He watched her leave, tail tucked between her legs as the door slammed shut.

Plopping down on the bed, some of the glamour of last night faded away as reality slapped Jimmy right in the face. Roderick Legrand, Boss Cold, was a dangerous criminal. Jimmy had pledged his body to the most feared man in all of Strassen Springs.

What the hell had he been thinking?

With a sigh, Jimmy put his troubles aside in favor of exploring the giant cart of food, starting with the dome Lola had been so particular about. He quirked a curious brow when he didn’t find food but a small card instead.

*Balance: $252,007.19*

*Tonight the real work begins.*

*-RL*

Jimmy made a face, dropping the card with a groan. His ass still ached and his cheeks were definitely bruised. He didn’t want to know what Cold meant by ‘real work,’ but he had a suspicion he wouldn’t be walking straight afterwards.

Poking through the different domes of food on the cart, he found a wide variety of dishes. Pancakes, waffles, fresh fruit, and eggs cooked at least four different ways. He didn’t understand why Cold had ordered so much, especially since Jimmy was obviously going to be dining alone. He appreciated the gesture, but decided not to read too much into it.

Jimmy made a valiant effort to eat every last bite until he was about to burst. He finally accepted defeat and waddled to the bathroom to change back into his clothes. He made sure to carefully tuck the cash into his wallet, unable to resist a big smile. He couldn't wait to go grocery shopping or pay his rent, or... oh, fuck, the rent. That had to come first.

Once he was finished getting ready, Jimmy was hesitant to leave so much food behind and stacked the rest of the fruit and remaining pancakes under one of the domes to take with him. He'd be back tonight and could return the dish then.

Even before handling his rent situation, however, he had to see Maury.

* * *

"Maury! Hey! You're never gonna freakin' believe this!"

"You ain't sellin' me that, kid," Maury warned of the domed dish as he peered over the counter upon Jimmy's arrival at his pawn shop. "I know you're desperate for moolah, but I gotta draw the line at you stealin' shit."

"What? Oh, no!" Jimmy shook his head, laughing as he set the dish in front of him and popped the dome off. "I didn't steal anything! These are leftovers from my breakfast."

"Breakfast where?" Maury asked suspiciously as he inspected a strawberry.

"At the hotel."

"What fuckin' hotel?"

"The hotel where I stayed last night..." Jimmy waggled his eyebrows, hoping Maury would catch on.

Maury's face was blank, munching on the stolen strawberry.

"With Boss Cold!" Jimmy exclaimed impatiently.

"Oh, fuck! Well, how did it go?" Maury asked, studying Jimmy's face carefully. "You had sex? Ya don't smell like sex."

Jimmy wasn't about to ask for the specifics of what Maury considered the scent of carnal activity to be, replying excitedly, "But I did! And, wow. Little intense, okay like, really intense, but he's gonna do it. He's really gonna let me do it, he'll let me work off the debt."

Maury actually looked relieved, patting Jimmy's cheek affectionately. "That's good, kid. Real good. Sees, I told you!" He grabbed the fork from the plate, helping himself to the pancakes. "I'm a fuckin' genius."

Jimmy nodded, laughing, "It's so freakin' crazy, Maury. Thank you. It took some, well, some negotiating, but we made a deal. It's gonna take like a month, but I will be able to pay back everything I owe. You see, he and Jules Price actually came to my apartment yesterday—"

"Ah, fuck," Maury grunted. "Hey, I didn't tell thems where you lived. Cold got that on his own. He'll find out everything about you, you know."

Jimmy shrugged, snorting, "Yeah? He'll be disappointed. My life isn't exactly that great. Pretty lame actually. But... things are looking up." He eagerly reached into his wallet to show Maury the cash.

"Holy fuck," Maury gasped, then scowled and popped Jimmy on the forehead with the fork. "What are ya, crazy? Don't be flashin' that around, kid. You'll get your stupid ass robbed in this damn neighborhood."

"Ow!" Jimmy pouted, shoving his wallet back in his pocket. "Sorry!"

"Don't be sorry, just don't be stupid." Maury grabbed another bite of the pancakes. "So. Tell me. What's the terms of this little deal?"

"Ten grand a night," Jimmy breathed out, still in a bit of disbelief over the figure. He swatted at Maury's hand, snatching a piece of pancake before he could eat it all.

"Ten fuckin' grand!" Maury said through a mouthful. "Holy fuck, kid. Nice work. Cold musta wanted that ass of yours pretty bad."

Jimmy blushed, chuckling lightly, "Well, I am pretty irresistible, Maury."

"I resist you just fine. Just be careful. Don't be gettin' all big-headed and shit. Remember what this is."

“I know, Maury.”

“Are ya sure?” Maury did not look convinced. “I know you, kid. You get your dick and your heart mixed up mighty quick. This ain’t a love story, it’s you trying to survive and doin’ what you gotta do.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jimmy sighed, his eyes gazing down at the floor. He remembered the faint warmth of a hand on his arm, quickly chalking it up to a dream again. He couldn’t help but feel strangely disappointed. “I know.”

“Don’t forget it,” Maury warned through another bite of food.

Jimmy gave a thumbs up, snagging one of the strawberries before Maury could finish the plate off.

“When you gonna see him again?” Maury asked.

“Tonight,” Jimmy said, unable to stop himself from grinning. “I’m gonna go get my rent settled up, try to look for a job—”

“Cold just gave you a job,” Maury protested, battling Jimmy for the last piece of pancake.

“Yeah, but ow, hey!” Jimmy shooed Maury’s fork away, getting a playful jab for his efforts, but still managed to triumphantly steal the last bite. “That money is just, like subtracted from what I owe him. He said that there might also be bonuses? Like if I do a really good job or something, but that gets taken from my debt, too. I think.”

“Then what the fuck is that in your pocket?”

“He said it was a tip,” Jimmy replied, “But I can’t count on that. I don’t know if he’s gonna be feeling that generous all the time.”

“Well, just make sure you do whatever you did last night, boom.”

Jimmy blushed, smiling shyly as he argued, “Come on, Maury, I need a real job. I’m not always gonna be whoring myself out to Boss Cold.”

“Fine,” Maury groaned. “Look, there’s a couple of places that might be willing to hire your skinny ass. There’s a new restaurant, Ingrid’s, they lookin’ for a—”

The store door opened, bell ringing loudly as someone walked in. Maury's smile suddenly dropped, his eyes narrowed and glaring over Jimmy's shoulder as he spat, "What the fuck do you want?"

Jimmy's stomach lurched to see such a hateful look on his friend's face, and he whirled around to see who it was that could have summoned such wrath. His breath got stuck in his throat, and he felt sick as soon as he saw him.

Detective Augustus Duplin.

This was the kind man who had adopted him after his father went to prison for his mother's murder, the loving man who had tried to raise him as his son and take care of him.

But he was also the very same cop who had arrested his father, testified against him at the trial, and kept Jimmy from seeing him. Their relationship had been rocky and finally broke when Jimmy turned eighteen. He had demanded to see his father, and Augustus had again refused to let him. Jimmy ran away that night and never looked back.

"Figured I would find you here," Augustus said, offering a strained smile. "Maury keepin' you out of trouble, Jimmy?"

"I'm keepin' him wherever the fuck he wants to be," Maury snapped back. "Preferably as far away from you as fuckin' possible."

"I'm here to talk to Jimmy, not you," Augustus said sternly, turning a pleading gaze toward Jimmy. "You look good, son."

Jimmy was stiff, unsure of the warring emotions tearing away inside him. He hadn't seen Augustus in several years. He had tried to visit Jimmy a few times to make amends, but they always fell back into the same argument that tore them apart in the first place.

Jimmy knew his father was innocent.

Augustus refused to believe him.

It was how Jimmy first started falling into debt, trying to pay a lawyer to look at his father's case and get it reopened. Lawyers were expensive, and it didn't take long to rack up a huge bill. When he ran out of money, he had

started borrowing from Maury and ended up with the huge mess he was in now.

Of all the feelings Jimmy had racing through him, he settled on anger. He scowled, saying bitterly, “I’m not your son, Augustus.”

“Jimmy—”

“Why are you here?” Jimmy demanded. “What do you want?”

“I just wanna talk to you,” Augustus said, holding out his hands as he approached slowly.

“Oh, yeah?” Jimmy scoffed, his arms crossing defiantly over his chest. “About what? About how you left my father to rot in prison after you arrested him? How you kept me from seeing him for all those years, even when I cried? Even when I begged you?”

Augustus flinched, but didn’t deny a word.

Jimmy was feeling pretty confident. He’d slept with the most notorious crime boss in all of Strassen Springs, and he had over a thousand dollars in his pocket. He planted his hands on his hips, chin held high as he ranted on, “How about when it was his birthday, and you wouldn’t even let me send him a card? Or when he had to have surgery because his appendix almost burst, do you remember that? He almost died in prison, and you still wouldn’t let me go see him!”

“Fuckin’ scumbag,” Maury spat in support, giving Jimmy an approving nod.

Augustus took every jab with a regretful expression, letting Jimmy vent all he wanted.

“Well?” Jimmy sneered, spurred on by his friend’s encouragement. “What is it? What could we possibly have to freakin’ talk about?”

“About why you were in Roderick Legrand’s hotel room last night,” Augustus replied with a heavy sigh.

Oh, crap.

“I wasn’t... that...” Jimmy stuttered, his face turning bright red immediately. He had always been a terrible liar, but especially to Augustus. That stern glare made his insides turn to jelly, and he stumbled to find the right words. “Th-th-that’s none of your business.”

“As one of the investigators on a homicide case where Roderick Legrand is the lead suspect, yeah, it is,” Augustus replied gravely.

Homicide? Jimmy gulped.

“How did you know I was there?” he accused, a new spark of anger giving him strength to bite back. “Are you having people follow me?”

Augustus shook his head with a scoff. “No, Jimmy. But I got plenty of people watching Legrand.”

With a huff, Jimmy retreated until his back hit the counter. He felt Maury’s hand clap on his shoulder and squeeze lightly.

“Unless he’s under arrest, he ain’t got nothin’ to say to you,” Maury snarled. “I think it’s mighty strange you only came lookin’ for Jimmy when you think he might be useful t’yous. How about you step off, Augustus?”

“I don’t know what kind of trouble this crook has gotten you into with Roderick Legrand,” Augustus said, his eyes tearful as he jerked a finger at Maury, “but I can help you, Jimmy. Whatever it is, just be honest with me, please.”

“Help me?” Jimmy scoffed in disbelief. “I asked you to help me get my dad out. I asked you for access to the case files so I could look into it myself. I asked you... I asked you for money when I was hungry, and you...” He was angry and overwhelmed, snapping, “I don’t need any help from you!”

“Jimmy,” Augustus said, taking another step forward. “Please. If you just answer a few questions, I can help you out—”

“Oh!” Jimmy practically shouted, laughing bitterly. “There it is. There, that’s why you came here. You don’t want to help me. You wanna use me!”

Augustus’ nostrils flared, arguing, “That’s not true. But whatever shit you’ve stepped in, you’re gonna need to give a little if you want the police to protect your ass.”

“Protect me from what?”

“From Boss Cold when he finds out you’ve been talking to the cops,” Augustus said with a little shrug.

“But I haven’t been,” Jimmy protested, eyes wide in shock. “I’m just talking to you...” Realization ran over him like a bucket of ice water, shivering as he bit the blood out of his lip to hold back a snarl. “Oh, my God.”

“Fuck you, Augustus,” Maury raged, slamming his fist down so hard the plate rattled. “You wouldn’t fuckin’ dare put that on the streets, you fuckin’ pig. What the fuck is wrong with you! Jimmy ain’t no fuckin’ snitch!”

“Augustus...” Jimmy’s heart was shattered, as he deflated against the counter.

“I will do whatever I have to if it means keeping you safe,” Augustus said softly. “Please. Just think about it, okay? I don’t want to force you—”

“But, oh, if you think it’s what’s best for me, you’ll just go on and do it,” Jimmy said bitterly. He stared at the floor, hugging his arms around himself. “Get the fuck out.”

“Jimmy, I have no idea what you were doing in that hotel with Legrand, and frankly, I don’t wanna know,” Augustus tried again, pleading, “but you’ve got no idea what you’re getting yourself into, son. Now, please—”

“I’m not your fucking son! I’m not your fucking anything!” Jimmy shouted, throwing his hands out in frustration. “Just, just get the fuck out!”

Augustus finally relented, taking a deep breath. Jimmy’s words clearly hurt him, but he said nothing for a few moments as he tried to gather his thoughts. He nodded shortly finally, saying, “If you change your mind, and I really hope you do, you know my number.”

“Yeah, well...” Jimmy stuttered for a big finish as Augustus walked away. “The joke’s on you ‘cause I don’t even have a phone! Ha!”

Maury cringed as the front door slammed, shaking his head. “Nice, kid. Not really, but you know, good try.”

Jimmy was shaking all over, turning around to grab Maury from over the counter and hugging him tight. “Oh, ffffuck.”

Maury gently patted Jimmy’s back, soothing, “Hey, it’s all right, kid. Forget about that prick.”

“Do you really think he would do that?” Jimmy asked nervously. “Do you think he’d tell people I was a snitch? There’s nothing to even snitch! It’s not like Cold is telling me all his nefarious, evil plans while we bang! Jesus, Maury. Cold is gonna have Jules Price set me on fire. Jules will do it, he’s crazy. He really likes burning things!”

“Calm down,” Maury chirped, cupping Jimmy’s cheek. “That stupid pig is all fucking talk. He’s a piece of shit, but even he ain’t that much of a piece of shit, okay? Don’t worry your pretty little head about it. Gonna give you wrinkles.”

Jimmy nodded weakly, trying to let Maury reassure him. He really didn’t feel that much better, but he smiled anyway. “Wrinkles, huh?”

“Yeah,” Maury chuckled, “and we gotta keep you pretty lookin’ for Boss Cold. Can’t have you looking all scruffy and shit.” He gave Jimmy one last squeeze before letting him go. “Go home. Wash your ass. Handle your shit, kid.”

Jimmy ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath. “Got it. Home. Wash ass. Will do.”

“And you know, just sayin’?” Maury offered with a tiny smirk. “Maybe it really wouldn’t be such a bad idea for you to get a phone?”

“Let’s see how broke I am after I buy food and pay my rent,” Jimmy laughed. “If I do, trust me, you’ll be the first one I call!”

“I fuckin’ better be. Get the fuck outta here,” Maury chuckled. “Big night tonight, right? Have fun, kid.”

“Fun, yup,” Jimmy said with a blushing smile, giving Maury one last hug before departing. He hurried home, anxiously bouncing in the backseat of the cab the whole way.

Even though Augustus had soured his morning, he refused to let it bother him. He was still going to see Boss Cold and do whatever he had to do to erase his debt. He knew in his heart that Augustus probably did mean well, but it hurt all the same that his intentions were not entirely pure.

They hadn't seen one another since their last fight when Augustus was trying to get Jimmy to come home again. It had ended just as all the others had, screaming and in tears. It had been at least two or three years, he figured, his brow furrowing as he tried to recall the exact date.

Whatever. It wasn't important.

Tonight was important. He had to get himself ready for another exciting evening with Boss Cold, and he had officially run out of nice things to wear. He smirked to himself, blushing as he realized that if tonight was anything like last night, then it really didn't matter what he wore.

He was actually looking forward to being with Cold again, shuddering at the memory of what it felt like to have the mob boss inside him. He had never experienced anything like giving himself over to Roderick Legrand's every desire, and he couldn't wait to do it again. He was still bouncing, full of nervous energy, smiling dopily as he gazed out the window.

It was enough that the cab driver laughed, teasing, "What's up, slim? Hot date tonight?"

Jimmy bowed his head, trying to hide a shy grin. "Yeah. Something like that."

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# Chapter Four

Rent taken care of and groceries purchased, Jimmy spent the rest of the day tidying up and dragging clothes downstairs to wash a few loads. He didn't have units in his apartment, but there were several coin-operated ones in the basement. It was nice to have fresh, clean clothes again instead of washing them out in his bathtub. As he put the laundry away, he debated what to wear for his evening with Cold. He had washed his red shirt, but he didn't want to wear the same outfit twice.

Doubting that Cold would care what he wore, he settled on jeans and a faded t-shirt. He washed up the dish he had liberated from the hotel, humming lightly to himself. He was in such a good mood he wasn't even going to let his confrontation with Augustus ruin it.

Jimmy briefly wondered if he should bring that up to Cold. Certainly the gangster knew the police were always watching him, but did he know about Jimmy's family? Did he know about Augustus? Would he have agreed to the deal if he knew?

Jimmy wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to anger Cold, and he certainly didn't want to do anything to upset their arrangement. Maury had said that Augustus wouldn't do something so mean, and he wanted to trust his friend. Maury had been watching out for Jimmy ever since he ran away, and he decided not to worry about it. If anything got weird or hairy, good old Maury would let him know.

Wait. How would he let him know?

*A phone*, Jimmy groaned to himself. He picked back through the cash left over from Cold's tip, finding only a hundred and seventy-eight dollars left. Oh, and two cents. He dragged the pennies around on his counter, pouting. Definitely not enough to purchase a phone, or pay the phone company what he owed to get his landline restored.

Maybe tonight he could earn himself another big tip, he decided, pushing his worries to the back of his mind as he got ready to leave.

A quick cab ride brought him back to the hotel, and he grinned shyly as he approached the front desk. He offered out the dish, explaining, “Look, so, I borrowed this, but... well, here.”

The clerk gave him a funny look but didn’t question his odd return. Jimmy practically skipped to the elevator, his body flush with excited energy. He wasn’t as nervous as before, the dinging of the passing floors almost soothing as he ascended to his destination.

The army of suited men was back again, Jules Price front and center, pursing his lips thoughtfully as he looked at his watch and grinned. “Look at you, Twig. Bein’ all on time and shit again. Boss likes that.”

“Thanks?” Jimmy replied awkwardly.

“Search time,” Jules said, gesturing two of his fellows forward to give Jimmy a quick pat down.

Jimmy obliged, certain that this was probably going to be part of his normal routine when visiting Boss Cold.

All clear, Jules chuckled with a wink, “You go have some fun.”

“I plan to,” Jimmy said with a blushing smile, hurrying inside as soon as Jules opened the door.

The door closed with a distinct click, and Jimmy let out a breath. Here in this room, the rest of the world seemed to melt away into nothing. There was no rent, no bills, no lawyers, no Augustus. It was only him and Boss Cold.

Cold was at his desk just as before, but this time he looked up when Jimmy walked in. He peered over the rim of his glasses, wrinkling his nose up. “What are you wearing?”

“Clothes?” Jimmy said, blinking in surprise. The jeans seemed fine, though the t-shirt had a few holes. “I didn’t think... since, well, you know... I’m not gonna be wearing them... for... very long.” His face turned red, asking quietly, “It’s not good?”

Cold didn’t answer, shaking his head and returning to his ledgers.

Jimmy frowned, rocking back and forth on his heels. His stomach wobbled a little, and now he wished he had thought better of his fashion choices.

“Shower,” Cold said, nodding toward the bathroom.

Jimmy nodded, scurrying off to bathe. The shampoo and soap bottles had been replenished from the previous evening, and there was a new plush robe waiting for him. Once he was done, he wrapped himself in the robe and walked back out into the room.

To his surprise, Cold wasn’t at the desk. He had moved to the small sitting area in between the bathroom door and the bed, lounging back in a plush slipper chair. He gestured for Jimmy to approach, pointing at the floor by his feet. “Kneel.”

Jimmy obeyed quickly, dropping to his knees in front of Cold. He swallowed thickly and looked up in expectation at the mob boss.

Cold leaned forward, not yet touching but gazing hungrily over Jimmy’s robed body. He smirked, asking softly, “You’ll really do whatever I want, won’t you?”

“Isn’t that what you want?” Jimmy replied uncertainly, his brows furrowing upward.

“Oh, I think it’s what *you* want,” Cold said, easily deflecting the question. “You’re so very eager to please.” He gently touched Jimmy’s chin, his thumb sweeping over his bottom lip. “You’d let me fuck you in front of the whole world, wouldn’t you.”

Jimmy blushed, leaning into Cold’s hand as much as he would allow. He could hear the steady thumping of his heart in his ears, drowning out the entire universe except the two of them. “Yes...”

“Mm. And that’s why we need a safe word, Mr. Poe,” Cold said, his thumb pulling Jimmy’s lip down, pinching it against his chin and making him whimper. “If we’re going to make the most of this little deal, even my desires must have their limits.”

Jimmy frowned, confused. “But you said whatever you want? That’s the deal?”

“It wouldn’t serve my interests to break you before you’ve paid off what you owe me,” Cold clarified with a dark chuckle. “And I did so enjoy our time together last night. It was very revealing.” He tilted his head, purring seductively, “You want someone to take charge, don’t you?”

Jimmy closed his eyes, nodding slowly. There was no point in denying it. “Yes.”

“You want someone to take away the fear,” Cold continued, his drawl positively hypnotic. “For someone to eliminate all the hesitation, to stiffen that shy sway in your step. You don’t want to worry any longer about what to say or what to do...”

A surge of emotion rocked Jimmy’s very soul from Cold’s flawless perception, his tongue meeting his thumb as it moved over his bottom teeth, and he groaned softly.

“Yes,” Cold growled, breath quickening as he spoke on. “You, Mr. Poe, need a purpose. You need that gratification that only comes from having someone to please.”

“Then let me please you,” Jimmy said desperately, daring to suck at the pad of Cold’s thumb, his eyes flicking open to stare up at him.

Cold seemed happy with that, a gorgeous smirk twisting his lips. “Good,” he said, a smile briefly lighting up his face then disappearing as quickly as it appeared. “Safe word, Mr. Poe?”

“Ice,” Jimmy replied softly, drawing out the word as a low hiss. It was an immediate response, lost in the beautiful icy blue of Cold’s eyes.

“Ice it is.” Cold smirked and lightly tapped his thumb against Jimmy’s chin. He leaned back in the chair, spreading his legs and slowly unbuttoning his pants to pull out his thick cock. “Come along, Mr. Poe. Let’s see how pleasing that mouth of yours is.”

Jimmy was salivating as he gazed over Cold’s intimidating girth. His cock was absolutely beautiful. Crap, how was he ever supposed to fit all of that in his mouth? He scooted forward, starting to press a hand against Cold’s thigh to get in a better position.

Jimmy gasped when Cold snatched his wrist, saying low, “No touching.”

“But I need to... okay. Yes, sir,” Jimmy nodded, blinking anxiously. He remembered how Cold had flinched in his apartment, but how the hell was he going to do this if he couldn’t use his hands? He let his arms drop to his sides and took a deep breath.

Bowing his head down, Jimmy pulled the tip of Cold’s cock into his mouth with only his lips. The taste was hot and salty, making him groan as he sucked softly. He struggled to take the thick member deeper, his eyes starting to tear up.

His lips felt like they were being stretched to their limit, trying to use his tongue to make up for all the inches he couldn’t fit by swirling around the tip. He wanted to use his hand to grab the remainder of Cold’s cock, but he didn’t want to risk angering him by touching him again.

Cold’s fingers suddenly dug into Jimmy’s hair, setting his scalp ablaze with pain and sensation. His hold was firm, his cock starting to move, his voice rumbling, “Open your mouth. As wide as you can.”

Jimmy sighed, letting his jaw hang loose. He inhaled sharply through his nose as Cold started thrusting his cock into his throat. Gagging instantly, he tried to swallow around the thick intrusion and his mouth rapidly filled with saliva.

“Relax,” Cold soothed, his cock sliding deeper down Jimmy’s throat.

Jimmy tried, God, did he try. It was almost impossible not to gag again, whining softly as Cold’s massive girth filled up his mouth. He was keenly aware of all the drool pooling, tears streaming down his cheeks as Cold fucked his face. He was getting more turned on with every slam, blood rushing down into his loins and making him shiver all over.

He loved Cold being in control. His mind was completely empty except for the sole focus he had of pleasing this man. It was soothing in spite of the discomfort, calming in a way Jimmy had never known before. He didn’t have to think or worry, he only had to obey.

It felt so fucking good.

Cold’s fingers were tangled tight in his hair, forcing himself deeper as he bucked his hips up. Jimmy was struggling, but he started to get the hang of it. Swallowing back around the head of Cold’s cock, he flexed his cheeks and lips to maintain some suction. He started moving his tongue, wagging back and forth on the underside of Cold’s shaft.

Jimmy could hear Cold’s breathing becoming a shallow pant, the quietest little groan managing to escape. Yes, that sound, that beautiful sound. He wanted to hear how good it felt, he wanted to know what a good job he was doing. Whining quietly, Jimmy gave everything he had, trying to make Cold moan again.

“Look at me,” Cold ordered, his voice raw and husky with need.

Jimmy’s eyes flickered upward to meet Cold’s gaze, unable to identify the intense expression on his face. He looked like he was concentrating, as if trying to figure out a puzzle, but there was an element of frustration like the solution was eluding him.

“You love this, don’t you?” Cold demanded, yanking Jimmy off his cock so he could answer him.

Jimmy gasped for air, his chest heaving as he licked his lips to catch some of the drool. He couldn’t nod because of how tightly Cold was holding him by his hair. Inhaling a few more precious gulps of oxygen, he finally whimpered, “I do...”

“Mmmm, good boy,” Cold sighed, rubbing the head of his cock over Jimmy’s lips.

Jimmy caught himself chasing it, his tongue darting out trying to get one more taste. He couldn’t explain the feeling of happiness that washed over him when Cold said he was a good boy, but nothing else in his entire life could compare. He whined again, managing to get one quick lick before Cold pulled him out of range.

“Easy,” Cold soothed, his tight grip finally releasing and softly petting through Jimmy’s ruffled hair. He wiped the drool away from his mouth, even his tears, fingers moving with a tenderness Jimmy hadn’t thought the gangster capable of.

Jimmy beamed up at him, trying to lean into Cold's hand like before. To his surprise, Cold cradled the side of his face, thumb drawing little circles over his cheek. "Good?"

"Very," Cold said, letting go all too soon and grabbing the condom from the table next to them. He rolled it down over his cock, patting his lap. "Come on."

Jimmy eagerly complied, slipping off his robe and being mindful to only use the sides of the chair to pull himself up. He straddled Cold's hips, shivering when he felt his cock pressing against his ass. He couldn't wait for it to be inside of him again. He was already reaching for the lube when Cold grabbed his wrist, pinning his hand behind him.

"Uh uh," Cold chastised, shaking his head. "You've got to learn to slow down, Mr. Poe. I didn't tell you to do that, now did I?"

"No, sir," Jimmy said, pouting. He cried out when Cold slapped his tender ass, his hips jerking forward. "Fuck!"

"Put both of your hands behind your back," Cold instructed, reaching for the lubricant as he calmly waited for Jimmy to comply.

Jimmy held his hands as ordered, loosely holding his wrist. He cried out when Cold spanked him again, teetering unsteadily in his lap. He didn't dare move his arms, tensing his legs to keep himself balanced.

He groaned when one of Cold's hands slid up and pressed into the small of his back, holding him tight so he wouldn't fall over. Lubed fingers were now circling around his hole, plunging inside with purpose and making Jimmy whimper.

Jimmy's head tipped to the side, glad for Cold's strong hand to keep him in place, arching his hips against the probing fingers inside him. "God..."

Cold made a small sound, almost a grunt, lewdly stretching out Jimmy's hole and making him whimper. He withdrew, snatching the condom and rolling it on quickly. "Hands stay," Cold reminded him, lifting Jimmy's hips and lining himself up.

“Yes, si-eerrr! Fuck!” Jimmy yelled when Cold thrust his cock in, forcing him to take every inch in one deep slam. He squirmed, gasping from the sting, tears again starting to flow as his fingers dug into his palm.

Cold was savage, taking Jimmy apart with brutal slams. He held his hips tightly, his teeth bared in a snarl as he fucked him. It went on and on without any signs of stopping, Cold’s hips pivoting like a machine.

Jimmy could only scream and pant, struggling to move in any way that could offer a reprieve. Cold wouldn’t let him, forcing him to stay as he was, grabbing a handful of his ass and squeezing the bruised flesh.

Jimmy hissed in surprise and pain, his cock achingly hard as it bobbed between them. He wailed as Cold suddenly spanked him again. Cold was fucking him so hard he thought his body was going to break. It was overwhelming, it hurt, and he didn’t know how much more he could handle.

Too much, it was too much. Jimmy squeezed his eyes closed, the safe word right on the tip of his tongue—

“You’re doing so well, Mr. Poe,” Cold growled, his teeth clenched together. “You’re taking my cock so fucking beautifully.”

The praise tipped Jimmy back from falling into the abyss, and he groaned as he started to rock his hips down with renewed vigor. He could do this. He was making Cold happy. He wanted to make him feel good. He moved his hips in sync with Cold’s, dropping himself down to meet every cruel thrust and groaning shamelessly.

It was starting to feel fantastic, and Jimmy’s head fell back as the pain was blanched by a wave of bliss.

Cold seemed to appreciate his efforts, not correcting him for being such an active participant. In fact, the snap of his body had stopped almost completely, letting Jimmy take over. Not being able use his arms, Jimmy focused on the muscles of his stomach and his lower back, rolling his body over and over as he fucked Boss Cold.

Cold had the oddest look on his face, something akin to surprise, watching Jimmy intently as he rode him. Jimmy didn’t understand why Cold was stopping when it was starting to finally feel so good.

Jimmy groaned, his hips frantically slamming down on Cold’s cock, trying to get him going again. “Please, sir... I need more...”

“You’ll take what I give you,” Cold warned, popping his ass viciously.

“Fuck! Please!” Jimmy pleaded, teetering slightly. Another hard spank threw him completely off balance and instinctively his arms flew forward to catch himself. One caught the side of the chair, the other landed on Cold’s chest.

Jimmy’s eyes nearly popped out of his head, freezing in place. Oh, God, he had touched him again. He wasn’t supposed to touch him. His palm was right over Cold’s heart, and he could feel the rapid thumping of his pulse beneath.

Cold’s hand snatched Jimmy’s wrist, but he didn’t push him away this time. He squeezed down tight, their eyes meeting, and Jimmy wished he could place the beautiful look in the other man’s eyes. It was intense, haunting, and sad.

Jimmy kept his hand where it was, too stunned to move.

Cold’s grip softened, his thumb lightly tracing the underside of Jimmy’s wrist. His lips parted, but he didn’t speak. He looked lost for a few seconds, his expression starting to harden again even though his touch remained gentle. His fingers slid up Jimmy’s arm, over his elbow and bicep. He was taking his time, cataloging every inch of flesh from Jimmy’s shoulder up to the back of his neck, resting there.

Jimmy gasped quietly, melting under Cold’s affections. He lightly tugged on his sweater, slowly starting to move his body once more. He needed friction desperately and gasped again when Cold suddenly sat up straight, holding Jimmy tightly around his waist and moving with him.

Their bodies were perfectly matched in rhythm, sliding together effortlessly. Cold’s cock was thrusting impossibly deeper, making Jimmy whimper sweetly. Their chests bumped together, Jimmy’s cock trapped between their stomachs. He wanted to kiss Cold so terribly.

Something was different now, the energy crackling around them had changed. Jimmy couldn’t explain it, but it was somehow more intimate.

This was a part of Cold he wasn’t supposed to see. He kept staring at his beautiful lips, dying for a taste.

Jimmy couldn’t help himself, leaning forward, eagerly trying to steal a kiss.

Cold’s fingers immediately snatched his head off to the side by his hair, and he growled softly in warning.

Jimmy yelped. That was a stupid idea. The intimate moment was lost, but God, it had been so beautiful while it lasted. He wailed when suddenly Cold’s teeth clamped down on his throat, his cock starting to ruthlessly slam inside him again.

“Touch yourself,” Cold panted against Jimmy’s neck, growling as he fucked him hard. “Come for me, Mr. Poe.”

Jimmy nodded, gasping and crying as he wedged his hand between them to grab his cock. He groaned as Cold’s hips stuttered beneath him, realizing that the man was coming. A few strokes of Jimmy’s hand sent him tumbling into bliss ahead of him.

Cold rocked their bodies together as they trembled, allowing himself one low moan of pleasure as he finally finished.

Jimmy smiled at the lovely sound, pleased with himself, and God, exhausted. His thighs were burning and so was his ass, as he deflated in Cold’s arms. He wanted to cuddle, to touch, but he knew that his hand still currently tangled in the fabric of Cold’s sweater was already pushing it.

Cold began to sink back into the chair, exhaling sharply as he pulled away. He didn’t seem to mind the mess all over his sweater, waving Jimmy away as he sighed, “Go get cleaned up.”

Jimmy obeyed, climbing off Cold’s lap with wobbly legs and heading to the bathroom. He stretched his aching body, humming contently as he turned the shower on. When he glanced at himself in the mirror, he was surprised at how happy he looked.

His face and chest were blotchy, his ass bright red, and he could make out a definite handprint or two. His hair was a ruffled mess, and he was shiny all over with sweat. Definitely looked like he’d just gotten righteously fucked.

But he couldn’t stop smiling. He was so happy.

He did make a bit of a face when he saw the giant bite mark Cold had left on his neck. For fuck’s sake. But then his cheeks blushed a little deeper in his reflection when he realized he liked seeing it there. He liked the idea of Cold marking him all up, leaving bruises and bites over every inch of him. With a shiver, he hopped into the shower. The night was still young. Maybe if he was lucky, Cold would do it again.

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# Chapter Five

Jimmy sang as he showered, his body filled with a lovely warmth and thoroughly satisfied. Cold had finally let him touch him. He had never had sex that felt half as good as those precious moments they'd shared together. Thinking about Cold's beautiful fingers sliding up his arm made him shudder, retracing the pattern with his own hand up to his neck where Cold had held him.

Being denied the kiss had stung, but feeling the ratcheting throb of Cold's heart underneath his fingers was an experience he would never forget. The ferocious way Cold had moved, the roll of his hips as he worked Jimmy's lean body over with that massive cock... Mmmph.

Jimmy still would have rather had his fingers clawing up Cold's bare back instead of being tangled in his sweater, but it was definite progress nonetheless. He didn't dare ask what Cold's hang-up was about being touched, but he did wonder if they would ever kiss. It was strange to have sex with someone when their lips had never touched.

It was backwards. Kissing came before sex. Kissing was the very first thing on the list!

Then again, Jimmy thought with a frown, those sorts of rules only applied to dating.

He and Cold were not dating. This was a business arrangement, albeit an enjoyable one. He was here to do whatever Cold wanted. If Cold didn't want to kiss him, that was his decision, and Jimmy didn't have any right to be upset by it.

Still, he was disappointed. Cold's lips looked absolutely delicious.

Jimmy pushed his thoughts back on a happier track. That beautiful way Cold had looked at him had taken his breath away, and the way his hand felt so hot against his skin made him tremble down in his bones.

Jimmy was already half hard again, grinning shyly to himself. He didn't know about Cold, but he was definitely ready for another go.

Washed and refreshed, he exited the bathroom wearing only a smile. He had left the robe on the floor by the chair, and he was only expecting to find Cold when he came out.

Oh, he was wrong.

There was a brunette woman perched on the edge of Cold's desk, long nails stroking through his short hair as they chatted. She was wearing a slinky halter top and long, flowing gaucho pants, swinging feet clad in stiletto heels. She was gorgeous.

Cold had changed his sweater and was actually smiling, pure and bright like Jimmy had never seen before. A jolt of envy struck him, and he realized his face was getting hot. He was too angry to even care that he was naked, staring at the woman with a sour expression.

Who was that, and why was she touching Cold?

Wait, better question, Jimmy's brain shifted gears as his jealousy turned to angst.

Why was Cold allowing it?

The woman turned, her painted lips curling into a familiar-looking smirk—though why it was familiar, Jimmy couldn't be sure—as she gazed appraisingly over Jimmy's bare body. "Oh, Roddy," she purred, "he is just darling."

Roddy?

Jimmy finally had enough sense to blush, stumbling as he fetched his robe.

"Get your own," Cold drawled with an affectionate roll of his eyes. "That one is mine."

Jimmy's face grew even hotter, unable to help a tiny smile as he quickly wrapped his robe around himself. *His*, Cold had said. He was Cold's.

Not his boyfriend, not his partner, but his... well, his something.

The woman pouted, her eyes intently following Jimmy as he covered up. She stuck out her lower lip at Cold, asking, "Are you sure I couldn't borrow him?"

“Very sure.” Cold’s smile vanished, now replaced by his usual smirk.

“What’s your name, sweetie?” the woman asked, gracefully sliding off the desk to approach him.

“Jimmy. Jimmy Poe,” he replied, a little nervous now. The woman was friendly, but there was something about the way her eyes followed him. It was downright predatory, just like Cold’s own ravenous gaze.

“I’m Rowena Legrand,” she purred, extending her hand toward him, palm down.

Jimmy did his best not to scowl when he heard her last name. He didn’t realize the gangster was married, though she didn’t seem bothered at all by his presence. It was very obvious what he and Cold had been doing, and Cold was purportedly gay.

Perhaps it was an arranged marriage, something politically motivated? Jimmy didn’t know all the ins and outs of the mob, but he figured people married all the time to keep the peace and strengthen alliances between families. That’s what happened on television anyway.

Jimmy forced a polite smile, taking her hand and placing a chaste kiss upon it. “It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Legrand.”

“Mrs.? Oh! How cute!” Rowena squealed happily. She smirked, giving Jimmy a knowing look as she teased, “Aw, look at you. Somebody is jealous!”

Jimmy’s flush was spreading down his neck rapidly. He hadn’t thought his displeasure was that obvious.

“It’s Miss Legrand, Jimmy,” Rowena explained, giggling softly. “Don’t you worry, I’m his sister. Besides, Roddy hasn’t touched a vagina since he popped out of his mother’s.”

Jimmy stuttered for an appropriate response, but nothing would come out. Apparently he had been watching too many movies. He was such an idiot. He tried not to look as relieved as he felt.

“Thank you for sharing,” Cold drawled, stacking up the ledgers on the desk in neat little piles.

Rowena beamed sweetly at Jimmy and winked slyly. The Legrand siblings had the same icy blue eyes, though Rowena's gaze was not as harsh as her brother's. Still hungry, yes, but kinder. Her very presence felt warmer, easy and relaxed, a stark contrast from her stoic sibling. Oh, but the smirk. The smirk was identical, and Jimmy felt foolish for not seeing the resemblance sooner.

When Rowena turned toward the desk, Jimmy caught himself staring at her exposed back. There were scars all over her skin. Dozens of them, long and thick, crisscrossing across her back like a corset woven from terrible pain.

Jimmy clicked his teeth together to shut his mouth when he realized he was gawking. He had never seen anyone with such terrible scars before, and he was not about to even hazard a guess as to their origin. Whatever it was, it couldn't be anything good.

"Oh, just trying to help out my big brother." Rowena popped back on the edge of the desk, grinning at Cold. Her eyes suddenly widened, gasping, "You should bring Jimmy!"

Oh, God. Bring Jimmy where?

"No," Cold said quietly, laying his briefcase on the desk and packing the ledgers away.

Rowena didn't acknowledge his answer, continuing excitedly, "He would be perfect!" She smiled at Jimmy, asking innocently, "Do you own a nice suit, Jimmy?"

Jimmy fidgeted, a little embarrassed that he didn't. He opened his mouth to squeak out a response, but Cold was already answering for him.

"No, he doesn't."

"I could take him shopping!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "Mmmm, are you free tomorrow, Jimmy?"

"Yes, he is," Cold answered again, "A perk of being unemployed. And no, you're not taking him shopping because he's not going to the party."

"Oh, shush, of course he is," Rowena insisted, not paying her sibling any mind. "Just imagine how darling he will look on your arm once I'm done

fixing him up."

Jimmy dropped down on the bed, watching them argue anxiously. Spending the night in a hotel room was one thing, but going to a party created a new nasty web of potential problems.

Jimmy knew that Augustus had people watching Cold now. If he was seen out and about in public with the gangster, there was a very good chance that Augustus may start to get ideas about their relationship. He might try to come after him again to get information on Cold.

Maury had insisted that Augustus wouldn't actually meddle in any way that could put Jimmy in danger, but he was suddenly afraid. Even if Augustus didn't say anything, Cold might still think he was a rat if he found out that his adoptive father was a cop.

A cop who was presently investigating the gangster for murder.

Oh, this wasn't good.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow afternoon," Rowena said, stubbornly ignoring the scowling look on her brother's face as she spoke to Jimmy.

"I'll think about it," Cold said after a long pause.

Rowena grinned as if he had just agreed, happily kissing his cheek as she slinked off the desk. She took the briefcase, twiddling her fingers at Jimmy in a little wave. "I'll see you tomorrow, cutie," she purred. "You fellas have fun!"

Cold looked irritated, grimacing slightly as his sister pranced away. He waited until the door shut to lean back in his chair with a heavy sigh. His long fingers massaged his temples, eyes closing slowly.

Jimmy was anxious, his foot bouncing on the floor as he watched Cold. He wasn't sure what to do since he hadn't been given any orders, waiting as patiently as he could with worry chewing on his gut.

He had to say something. He had to tell Cold before anyone else did and this all blew up in his face.

“Cold, sir,” Jimmy began quietly, “there’s something... I think I need to tell you.”

“What is it about?” Cold raised a brow, not sounding particularly interested.

“Well, about my family,” Jimmy replied, fidgeting anxiously.

“Something... personal?” Cold asked, his eyes slowly opening. He studied Jimmy thoughtfully, rising from the desk and approaching the bed.

“Yes,” Jimmy said with a thick swallow.

Cold hummed quietly, shooing Jimmy to the other side of the bed so he could sit down. He pressed his back against the center of the headboard, stretching out his long legs.

Jimmy licked his lips, heart in his throat. He had to do this, he had to tell Cold the truth. “Sir?”

Cold snorted softly and patted his thigh, Jimmy crawling over obediently. He started to straddle Cold’s hips, thinking he was going to ride him again, but Cold corrected him with a firm squeeze on his arm. He jerked his head, directing Jimmy to turn the other way.

Jimmy whined softly, twisting around as commanded. He wanted to lean back and press up against Cold’s chest, desperate for contact, but Cold pushed him forward. He was on his knees and elbows, his ass right in Cold’s face.

Whimpering as Cold’s hands slid up his legs underneath his robe, Jimmy closed his eyes, body eager to submit, but he couldn’t stop that little voice screaming inside his head.

Jimmy felt like he was going to burst if he didn’t get this out, trying again, “Sir, I really need to tell you who—”

“I don’t care,” Cold said flatly. His nimble fingers moved over Jimmy’s hips, his ass, pushing the robe up and out of his way.

“But, sir, I think you need to... oh, fuck,” Jimmy whined, his toes curling when Cold’s fingers lightly danced over his hole. He heard the click of a bottle of lube being opened, his cock twitching in anticipation.

“I think you need to be quiet,” Cold said, more interested in spreading Jimmy’s cheeks and probing at his tender hole with slick fingers. “Not another word, not a sound, unless I ask you a question. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy replied, taking a deep breath. The urge to obey was greater than the need to tell Cold the truth about his family, his worries easing away as he listened to that beautiful voice.

“Oh? Do you really? Let’s see,” Cold taunted, his voice low and positively wicked. His fingers suddenly plunged inside Jimmy’s hole as he chuckled softly.

Jimmy bit his tongue trying not to cry out, breathing in and out of his nose frantically.

Cold’s fingers were methodical, and fuck, how were they so long, dipping slowly in and twisting just right to make Jimmy want to scream.

He bit down on his fist, panting hard as he did his absolute best to remain perfectly silent.

“How would you feel about a small amendment to our deal?” Cold asked, completely calm. They might as well have been chatting over cards, never mind that Cold was currently knuckle deep inside of Jimmy’s ass.

“W-what kinda amendment?” Jimmy hissed through gritted teeth.

“I want to add an option to extend your services outside of my bed,” Cold replied. “Would you be interested?”

“You mean the party Rowena was talking about? Oh, fu-uuuck!” Jimmy squealed as Cold’s fingers twirled and made his legs shake. He could feel intense pressure against his prostate, and he couldn’t help but let a small whimper creep out.

“Yes,” Cold answered quietly, pressing harder, and Jimmy held his breath so he wouldn’t scream. “Usual rate, ten thousand dollars for the entire evening? Additionally, I will acquiesce to my sister’s demands, and I will cover your wardrobe.”

Jimmy sighed in relief as Cold slowly withdrew his fingers. “I’ll go. What... What would I need to do?”

“Exactly what I want you to do,” Cold replied dryly, his hands resting on Jimmy’s cheeks and squeezing softly. “Be quiet, stay close, and look pretty.”

Jimmy could sense warmth near his sensitive hole, his eyes wide with need and trying desperately not to make another peep. Cold’s hands were guiding him backwards and his mouth was right there at his ass, literally a breath away from touching him.

“So,” Cold said quietly, his lips brushing ever so slightly against Jimmy’s flesh, “we have a deal?”

“Ye-esssss! Oh, God!” Jimmy moaned, Cold’s tongue suddenly pressing into him, his head dropping forward on the mattress. Cold’s tongue was inside of him, moving just as nimbly as his fingers, pushing deep and with great skill, sucking softly at the edge of his rim.

Jimmy clawed at the sheets, pushing back against Cold’s mouth, mewling pitifully. He knew he was supposed to be quiet, but how could he with Cold’s tongue fucking him like that?

He’d had rim jobs before, but no one had ever eaten him out like this. Cold’s tongue kept pressing in impossibly deeper, growling softly as his teeth lightly nipped at Jimmy’s tender skin. It was that flash of teeth that finally made Jimmy cry out, the brief sting of pain mixing so beautifully with the pleasure. He was shaking all over by the time Cold was pulling away, his velvety voice taunting, “And you were doing so well...”

“Please, sir,” Jimmy pleaded, trying to arch his hips back toward Cold’s beautiful mouth, sobbing quietly. “Please don’t stop.”

“Aw, but I told you to be quiet,” Cold purred nastily. Jimmy could hear him licking his lips and the end table drawer opening. “You think you deserve a treat when you’ve been bad?”

“No, sir.” Jimmy shivered. The disappointment washing over him was overwhelming. He wanted more of Cold’s tongue, more of his anything,

though he knew he didn’t deserve it for disobeying him. He whined, pleading quietly, “I’ll be good, please.”

“Sit up,” Cold said patiently, strong arms helping Jimmy lean back and peeling off his robe. “Open your mouth.”

Jimmy obeyed and blinked at the sudden taste of latex, a rubber ball resting between his teeth. It felt unnatural and strange, thick straps lightly scratching his cheeks as Cold buckled it into place.

A gag. Cold had gagged him. Jimmy’s tongue slipped around the ball, taking in the new taste. It was a little weird, but the leather felt good. It was soothing, and he was oddly calm in spite of how aroused he was.

Now he could be a good boy, he could be quiet like Cold wanted him to be. He didn’t have to fight so hard, he could enjoy himself, and do exactly what Cold wanted.

“There,” Cold sighed, very pleased, “much better.”

Jimmy whimpered experimentally, the sound promptly muffled.

“Lovely,” Cold praised, reaching up and grabbing a handful of Jimmy’s hair. He pulled him back against his chest as he slid Jimmy up into his lap, saying quietly, “Thumbs up for yes, thumbs down for no or if you want me to stop at any point. Do you understand?”

Thumbs up, without hesitation.

“Good,” Cold said, quick hands getting himself ready, “because I can’t wait to hear you try to scream.”

Jimmy was perfectly pliant, gasping as Cold’s thick cock began to push inside his slick hole. He moaned loudly, the gag stifling the sound but not completely. Cold’s fingers dug into his hips, and he began to grunt as he quickly set a brutal pace. He was rough, forcing Jimmy to bounce up and down on his cock.

Jimmy submitted, giving himself over to every demand that Cold’s cock made of his body. His cries of pleasure were somewhat muted by the gag, but Jimmy began to suspect that Cold was enjoying how he sounded like this. The louder he tried to cry out, the harder Cold fucked him.

Jimmy started drooling profusely, whining shamefully at the mess he was making of himself. He tried to swallow as much of it as he could, but soon it was dripping down his chin and onto his chest. He tried tilting his head back, to use gravity to his advantage, gulping awkwardly between groans.

One of Cold's hands suddenly curled around the front of Jimmy's neck for a few slams, his fingers sliding down over his chest and finding the slick spill of saliva. Cold gasped, tracing the drool up to where the gag sat in Jimmy's mouth, and he let out a beautiful moan.

Jimmy's eyes closed, lost in bliss at the gorgeous sound, his head falling back against Cold's shoulder. Before he could even think about what a terrible mistake he had made, Cold's hand splayed over his throat again.

Jimmy gasped, his body stiffening up, as he tensed, expecting a swift punishment. But Cold didn't try to move him or reprimand him. He actually held Jimmy firmly in place, hand squeezing his neck softly as he growled in his ear, "Still good?"

Jimmy gave a quick thumbs up, crying out as Cold became even more ferocious. He started bucking his hips rapidly, drawing his knees up for leverage as he tore Jimmy apart. His labored panting made Jimmy shiver all over, his thighs on fire as he struggled to keep up with him.

He was certain that this was as close to heaven as he would ever know, every bit of his body and soul offered up for Cold to devour.

Cold took it all, every muffled cry and drop of spit, allowing their bodies to press closer than they had ever before. Even through the sweater, Jimmy could feel the heat of Cold's body against his back.

Cold's fingers slid from Jimmy's neck to his mouth, teasing over his lips and swirling in the drool that had collected on his chin. His touch was positively reverent as he moved over the bottom of the ball where his teeth met the rubber. Cold's breathing and growling was reaching a feverish pace, which meant the end was near.

Whimpering desperately, Jimmy tried to turn his head toward Cold, his eyes pleading with him for release. He wanted to come so badly it hurt, but not without permission, not yet.

“Go on,” Cold snarled quietly, his hand clasping back around Jimmy’s throat. “Use all that pretty spit. Get your hand good and wet, and then touch yourself.”

Jimmy groaned, nodding obediently, his hand quickly wiping the drool up that had collected on his chest, grabbing his cock and frantically jerking himself off. It was sticky and dirty and Jimmy moaned shamelessly as the pressure became overwhelming.

Jimmy gave Cold everything he had, slamming his body down to bring them both over the edge. His hips bucked hard, going for broke, Cold’s hand tightening down on his throat as they writhed together in bliss.

Ecstasy exploded right before Jimmy’s eyes like a barrage of fireworks as he came, sobbing and choking on his own tears. His body finally gave out, exhausted and collapsing against Cold. He was dizzy, mewling softly as Cold gave a few more slams to finish himself off.

Cold grunted low, a deeply satisfied sound, his lips brushing against Jimmy’s ear as his hand slowly withdrew. He carefully removed the gag and gently petted Jimmy’s face where the straps had been, purring, “Excellent work, Mr. Poe.”

Gasping for air, Jimmy smiled brightly, preening at the sweet praise. He was limp as a rag doll, letting Cold carefully lay him down against the sheets, totally worn out, but his heart felt incredibly full.

Cold moved from the bed, disposing of the condom and fixing his pants up quickly. Wordlessly, he headed into the bathroom, the door shutting tight.

Jimmy stretched out his long body, moaning loudly to himself in pure satisfaction. He was a sticky mess, his body throbbing from being used so roughly, and he felt absolutely fantastic. He didn’t want to ever move from this bed. He remained splayed out on his back until Cold returned.

Cold sat down on the edge of the mattress, a washcloth in his hand. Jimmy was expecting to take it and clean himself up, but to his surprise Cold started wiping him down. The washcloth was wet but warm, and Jimmy practically moaned from the attention. Cold touched every inch of him, meticulous and thorough, making sure to erase every trace of bodily fluids.

When Cold seemed satisfied that Jimmy was clean, he briefly touched his hair, murmuring, “I’d daresay you’ve earned yourself a little bonus tonight, Mr. Poe.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jimmy sighed contently. He had never felt so proud of himself, happy that he had done such a great job.

Cold smiled at him, brief but uncharacteristically happy, enough to make Jimmy’s stomach flutter. It only lasted a moment before Cold rose again and returned to the bathroom. The door shut, and Jimmy heard the lock engage.

Pulling the sheets up over himself, Jimmy wiggled his jaw to ease some of the tension out. It was sore from being forced open for so long, but he couldn’t stop smiling. The sex had been absolutely incredible; the rimming, the gag, and especially Cold allowing him to be so close.

The gentle way Cold had tended to him afterwards made Jimmy’s very soul ache. He wanted to please Cold even more than ever, desperate to do anything asked of him just to get that kind of attention again. He could hear the shower starting, wishing he could be in there with Cold to help wash him.

It drove him crazy that he still had no idea what the man looked like naked.

His imagination ran away from him, fantasizing about a flawless chiseled chest and moist, dripping abdominals. He was too damn tired to stay awake and hopefully catch a peek and see if the real thing could compare to his fantasy. He wiggled around the bed, getting comfortable, and his eyes started to close. Despite his brain being the consistency of pudding from an evening of intense stimulation, he knew he had to talk to Cold about Augustus before it was too late.

Tomorrow. He would talk to him about it tomorrow before the party.

Jimmy felt a longing deep inside of him, and he realized that he didn’t want to lose the arrangement he had with Cold. It was about the money, he told himself, he had to make sure he paid off his debt. He wanted to be able to buy groceries, get his fucking life together, and finally get his father out of prison.

But his last waking thoughts were of icy blue eyes and a wicked smirk. No matter how hard he tried, he knew in his heart that it wasn't only about the money. Not anymore.

Jimmy passed out, not waking again until there was a familiar frantic knock at the door at a quarter after nine. He mumbled sleepily, flailing around to retrieve his robe. Cold was long gone, and Jimmy couldn't say whether or not he had actually slept next to him last night. He'd slept so soundly that a bomb going off probably wouldn't have woken him.

Lumbering to the door, Jimmy glanced through the peephole to see Lola's frantic face. Late again.

Jimmy grinned, letting her in with the giant cart of food, already soothing, "Hey, it's okay, don't worry about it—"

"Please tell Mr. Frost I am so sorry!" Lola was crying as she struggled to get the tray set up and set a domed dish on top. "The kitchen, it's just so much—"

"Really! It's not a big deal! It's all good!" Jimmy assured her, smiling brightly. "I promise, it's fine. As far as I know? Hey, you were here at nine o'clock sharp."

"Thank you, Jimmy," Lola sighed, obviously relieved. She pressed her hands together, fidgeting anxiously as she asked, "If it was a smaller order, it might not be so difficult to make it here on time."

Jimmy nodded, his head tilting curiously. "Does, uh, Mr. Frost always order this much food?"

"No, sir," Lola replied, shaking her head. "Yesterday was the first time he's ever ordered any room service other than drinks."

"I'll talk to him," Jimmy promised, smiling warmly.

Lola patted Jimmy's arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Thank you so very much, I appreciate that. Oh! And read your note, don't forget to read the note first."

"I will! Thank you, Lola!" Jimmy waved farewell, waiting for her to leave before lifting the dome. Like yesterday, there was another card waiting for

him. Jimmy grinned, happily plopping down in bed to read it.

*$237,007.19*

*Rowena will come by your apartment at four o’clock. Be ready.*

*-RL*

Jimmy’s stomach churned in a mix of excitement and dread as he ate his breakfast. Somewhere between shopping with Boss Cold’s baby sister and attending a party with him, he had to find time to talk to him about Augustus Duplin.

Jimmy didn’t know what Cold was going to do when he told him, but if there was any chance of their deal moving forward, he had to tell him the truth.

But first things first. Today was Friday, and Jimmy still had enough cash left over from his tip to grab a taxi to Westchester Prison. They had visiting hours from ten o’clock to two, and Jimmy already knew what he was going to do that morning.

He was going to see his father.

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# Chapter Six

David Poe had been arrested seventeen years ago for the murder of his wife, Eliza.

The neighbors heard sounds of a scuffle and screaming, quickly calling the police. David was found standing over her body with a knife in his hand when authorities arrived. He insisted he had come home late and found his wife already dead on the floor, picking up the knife only after checking for vitals and realizing she was beyond resuscitation.

Even after all these years, Jimmy could still remember his father screaming his innocence as Augustus dragged him away in handcuffs. Jimmy had tried to grab David's leg, pleading with Augustus and begging for him not to take his dad away. He had just lost his mom, and he didn't want to lose his dad, too. Jimmy got so hysterical that Augustus had another officer remove him and place him in the back of a squad car until he calmed down.

He had to watch as Augustus hauled his father off, completely helpless to do anything to stop it, while all their neighbors watched and pointed. He kept trying to tell the cops that he had seen what happened, he knew his father didn't do it. He knew exactly who had killed his mother, and it wasn't David.

"It was the Man in the White Coat!" he had screamed. "The Man in the White Coat did it!"

But no one, not even Augustus, believed him. He was only a child, obviously confused and traumatized. There was no evidence of anyone else in the house, and no one had been seen entering or exiting. With no other suspects, the trial had been swift, and the sentence was life in Westchester Prison.

Jimmy hadn't seen his father again until he was eleven. It was the first of many times he would run away from Augustus' house, having stolen cash from his wallet to get a taxi down to the prison. He had tearfully pounded his little fists against the window in the visiting room, trying to find some way to break his father out and almost got thrown out by the prison guards.

David had looked on, powerless and miserable, pressing his hand against the glass and telling him, “Hey, hey, slugger. Put your paw up here, okay? Right next to mine. Remember, son. There’s only an inch of glass between our hands, okay? That’s it, just an inch. That’s not really that much, right? We’re closer than you think.”

“It might as well be a million miles,” he’d cried.

“No,” David soothed. “It’s just an inch, an itty bitty little inch. And remember, there might be an inch of glass between our hands, but there’s nothing separating our hearts, okay? There’s nothing keeping my love from you, not ever. No matter how far apart we are, I will always be with you. I love you, son.”

Jimmy never forgot that moment, even after Augustus came to drag him back home and grounded him for a month for running away.

When Jimmy finally turned eighteen and Augustus couldn’t keep him away any longer, he visited his father as often as he could. Even with an inch of glass between them, they managed to make up for the time that Augustus had cost them and forged a beautiful friendship. David was more than his father; next to Maury, he had become Jimmy’s best friend, and he treasured their visits.

It had been over a month since Jimmy had been able to see David last. The city bus didn’t go all the way to the prison and since Jimmy had to sell his car, he had no other way of getting there except to take a cab. He had no regrets draining his cash to make the trip, eager to see his father for the first time in weeks.

“Hey, slugger,” David said with a grin as soon as Jimmy sat down in front of him and picked up the phone. He raised his hand and gently pressed it against the glass just as he had the first time Jimmy visited him. “Was starting to get worried, hadn’t seen you in a while.”

“Things have been kinda tight,” Jimmy said, his hand hovering over his father’s in greeting, all part of their ritual. “Couldn’t afford to get down here, but it’s okay! Everything is getting better now.”

David squinted. “Son, is that... is that a hickey?”

Jimmy’s eyes widened, blushing instantly as he slapped his hand over his neck. “Uhhh...”

David burst into laughter, teasing, “Oh, well, I guess things are really getting better, huh?”

“Uh, well, yeah, it’s kind of complicated,” Jimmy stammered, grinning shyly.

“Relationships always are,” David assured him.

“Anyway. I still haven’t been able to get access to the case files,” Jimmy said, quickly shifting the conversation. “The lawyer told me that if I get a motion from a judge, they’ll have to let me look at them since we’re trying for an appeal. Because of discovery—”

“Son,” David gently cut in, his fingers tapping lightly at the glass, “I haven’t seen you since last month. I’d rather hear about how you got that hickey than talk about the case.”

Jimmy pouted. How was he going to explain this to his father? “Uhhh...”

“Who’s the lucky girl?” David asked with a smirk.

“It’s a guy, actually,” Jimmy said slowly, “but I don’t think... you’d approve.”

“Jimmy, you came out to me years ago,” David said, obviously hurt. “You know I love you and support whoever you want—”

“No, no, no! It’s not that he’s a guy!” Jimmy replied hurriedly. “It’s that he’s, well. Uhm.” The mob boss of Strassen Springs and probably almost definitely a murderer. “He’s... not exactly what you... might want for me?”

David tilted his head, trying to fill in the blanks. “Older?”

“Yes!” Jimmy exclaimed. “He’s older.”

“That’s it?” David scoffed. “How much older?”

Jimmy stared blankly. He actually had no idea how old Cold was. All the white in his hair hinted that he was definitely older than he looked, or maybe being a mob boss caused premature graying. “Well, I’m not...

exactly sure. It’s still very new, uh, I don’t know how serious it is. Exactly. Yet.”

David smiled warmly, nodding. “Seems like it’s off to a very good start at least.”

“Yeah.” Jimmy knew his entire face was bright red, able to feel the heat radiating off of his skin. He couldn’t help but smile when he thought about Cold, sighing as he added, “But I don’t think it’s gonna last.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think he’s looking for anything serious,” Jimmy replied after a few moments, choosing his words carefully.

“He’s an idiot then,” David said, snorting roughly, “because you’re amazing. Anybody would be lucky to have you.” It seemed as if he could sense how awkward Jimmy was feeling about discussing his love life, so he opted to change the subject himself this time. “How’s Maury doing? Still rough as hell?”

“Always,” Jimmy chuckled. “But he’s good. Finally quit smoking. You know, mostly.”

“Hey, anything less than the three packs a day he used to smoke is an improvement!” David smiled fondly. “I’ll always be grateful for him looking out for you. He’s a good man.”

“The best.”

“So, how are your classes going?”

“Fine,” Jimmy fibbed innocently, forcing a strained smile. As far as David knew, Jimmy was still in college despite having dropped out a few years ago to work on getting the case reopened. David also thought that Jimmy was working at a local law firm as an intern, and he’d actually been fired from that job last year for snooping around for information on said case.

“Just fine?” David probed.

“Yeah! I’m, uhm, just taking the one class right now,” Jimmy stammered. He was a terrible liar, but he didn’t want his father worrying about him.

“Probably gonna take another semester off soon.”

Brows furrowing together, David sighed. “Son, if you keep taking time off, you’re never going to be a lawyer.”

Jimmy’s smile turned a little sad. “Yeah, I know, Dad. It’s okay, I’m going to get it figured out. I just have to keep saving up so I can pay for my classes myself. I’m already kinda drowning in student loans.”

“Yeah.” David nodded in return. “I know, slugger. I just want you to have a good life. Graduate, pass the bar, get a good job.” He grinned, teasing, “Get your old man out of prison.”

“Hey, I’m working on it!” Jimmy laughed. That had been the original plan before he couldn’t afford to pay his tuition anymore. He wanted to be a lawyer so he could free his father and eventually help others that were wrongfully imprisoned.

But using tuition money for legal fees does not a lawyer make, and Jimmy had chosen to keep pursuing his father’s case instead of continuing school.

“Seriously,” David said, “I want you to be happy. Gotta keep an eye on your debts, you know. You don’t want those to get out of hand.”

“Right,” Jimmy replied, grinning stupidly. He had a hell of a debt that he was working on right now, but he wasn’t exactly complaining about how he was working it off.

“What is it?” David quirked a brow. He actually snickered, teasing again, “Hmmm, somethin’ got you thinking about that new fellow?”

“Wha—? No! Why, why would you say that?” Jimmy stuttered, scrubbing his hand over his face.

“Because I can read you like a book,” David said with a small smirk. “You’ve got the same googly-eyed look that you used to get with Anna.”

Jimmy’s smile faded.

“Shit. Sorry, kiddo,” David apologized, cringing slightly.

Anna was Augustus Duplin’s daughter and Jimmy’s childhood crush. The loss of their friendship was a casualty of the break between Jimmy and

Augustus. Anna easily took her father's side over Jimmy's, and it had broken his heart to lose her. They hadn't spoken more than a few words to each other since Jimmy left the Duplin home.

Jimmy still thought of her often, but that part of his life was over. His crush had turned into full blown puppy love when they were teenagers, though Jimmy never confessed his feelings. They were best friends, and he never wanted to do anything to lose that.

But Jimmy couldn't give up on his father, and when he turned his back on Augustus, he ended up losing her anyway. She moved out of Strassen Springs years ago to finish school. He didn't know what had become of her, but he hoped she was happy.

"It's okay," Jimmy said with a shrug. "It was a long time ago."

"Everything feels like a long time ago now," David remarked, leaning forward on his elbows, cradling his chin in his hand. "You know, I'm really glad you came today. There's something I wanna talk to you about. Seriously."

Jimmy frowned, tilting his head. "What is it, Dad? Is somebody messing with you again?"

"No, no," David said quickly. "Nothing like that." He sighed, his face wrinkling up in distress.

"What?" Jimmy pressed, his stomach twisting up in dread.

"I want you to give up appealing the case," David said slowly, his words precise as if he had been practicing them. "If you still want to be a lawyer, that's fine. I hope you have a great career. But you've got to let me go, son."

"Wha..." Jimmy stared at his father in shock, his chest heaving as he struggled to take a breath. "No. No, I'm not doing that."

"Son," David said firmly, "it's been almost twenty years."

"I'm not giving up on you," Jimmy tearfully insisted, his fingers clenching around the phone. "I know you didn't kill Mom. I know what I saw, and I'm never going to stop."

“And just how long is this going to go on for?” David asked softly. He sounded tired, defeated. “I love you, but we both know you’re not really in school right now. I have no idea what you’re doing for money, but I know it’s not at that law firm.”

Jimmy gulped, gaping like a fish out of water. So much for that cleverly constructed ruse.

“You’re an awful liar, slugger,” David said, offering a small smile. “I don’t want you to keep putting your life on hold because of me.”

“But Dad,” Jimmy said firmly, “you are my life. You’re the only family I have left. I love Maury, but he’s not you. You’re... you’re everything to me. I don’t care what you say. I’m getting things figured out, I am, I promise. I’m super sorry for lying to you, but I’m not going to give up on you. I love you.”

David’s eyes were wet with tears, struggling to maintain his composure. “I love you, too,” he murmured, lip trembling and resolve crumbling. “I love you so very much.”

Jimmy put his hand back on the glass, nodding frantically. “Just an inch, remember? That’s it.”

David took a deep breath, smiling weakly as he put his hand up to join his son’s. “Just an inch.”

The buzzer sounded, notifying them that their time was up. Jimmy groaned in frustration, his eyes pleading with his father. “I love you, Dad. I’m going to get you out of there, I swear.”

“I love you, too,” David repeated quietly. “I love you so much. No matter what, I am so proud of you and grateful for everything you’ve tried to do. But please remember, son. Only one of us is actually in a prison, okay?”

Jimmy frowned, not understanding what he meant. But before he could ask, the guard was already there to escort his father away. Jimmy stood, waving and watching his father for as long as he could until he disappeared back into the depths of the prison.

He shuffled outside to wait for another cab, miserably depressed. He had literally spent all his life trying to free his father. He had given everything he had, and a lot that he didn't, in an effort to prove his innocence. He knew his father didn't do it.

He knew the Man in White was real.

It had been so long that he only saw him in dreams now, but if he concentrated he could recall bits and pieces. The bright white coat, the sneer on his twisted face, his mother's cries, the blood...

Jimmy squeezed his eyes closed, forcing the memories back when it became too hard to breathe. There were benches set up outside the prison gates, and he sat down as he tried to calm down. He wasn't crazy. The Man in White was real, and one day, somehow, Jimmy was going to find him. He was going to find him and free his father.

But at what cost, a little voice whispered in the back of his mind. He'd lost the entire Duplin family, his college education, his potential career, and he was currently pimping himself out to Boss Cold to pay off his massive debt. Not to mention, it was a debt that had gotten him no closer to freeing his father.

With the money he'd spent in legal fees, he could have finished law school and been representing his father himself by now. He tried to tell himself there was still time. Once he had this mess straight with Cold, he could finish his degree. It was possible. He didn't have to give up, he just couldn't. He had to keep hope alive. Not just for his father, but for himself, too.

The taxi arrived to carry him home. Rowena Legrand would be by soon to take him shopping. Jimmy took a long shower, shaved, sorted more laundry, and thumbed through the little bit of cash he had left. Twelve dollars and nineteen cents.

Nineteen cents.

Jimmy spread the pennies and nickel and dime out on his kitchen counter. That number seemed inescapable and meaningless all at the same time.

Nothing really had meaning now unless it was being whispered in his ear in a velvety tone.

Cold.

God, that voice was going to be the death of him. Jimmy's own father had told him to find happiness, and nothing had ever brought him the same gratification as being a willing slave to Cold's drawling demands.

But what he had with Cold was just business, it wasn't personal. He didn't get some dumb love-struck look on his face when he thought about Cold. It definitely didn't make his heart flutter to think about the brief moments he had been able to touch him. It was just a deal, just a financial agreement.

Right?

Jimmy's head snapped up when he heard a knock at his door. He stared at the clock on his stove. It was four-thirty. Rowena apparently did not have the same appreciation for punctuality as her brother.

When he opened the door, Rowena was propped seductively against the frame with a brown paper grocery bag in her arms and a ridiculously giant purse over her shoulder, grinning slyly like a cat.

She dropped her voice low, imitating her sibling as she greeted him, "Hello, Mr. Poe."

Jimmy smiled in spite of himself, gesturing for her to come on in. "Hey!"

"Never too early for margaritas," Rowena chirped as if answering a question Jimmy hadn't asked. She brushed by him and headed straight to the kitchen as if she had been over here a thousand times before, pulling out bottles from the paper bag that Jimmy recognized as tequila and sweet and sour mix. "You know, you really live in a fucking dump," she said dryly, glancing around the dilapidated kitchen.

"I know," Jimmy said, frowning at the jab. "It's all I can afford."

"Aw, I'm sorry, sweetie," Rowena soothed, batting her eyes at him. "Don't feel bad. You know, me and Roddy actually used to live two blocks down from here."

“Really?” It was hard to imagine Cold living in this part of town. It wasn’t exactly nice.

“Yeah. Fortunes can change overnight, sweetie,” Rowena snorted, turning her head to smirk at him as she pulled a blender out of her large purse. “You don’t know my brother very well, do you?”

Jimmy blushed slightly. “Didn’t exactly have time to Google him while Jules was trying to roast my hand.”

Rowena laughed, a pretty sound like a bell ringing. “Aw, but it was worth it, right? After all, now you have this little ‘arrangement.’” She briefly paused making drinks to wiggle her fingers in air quotes.

“He told you.” Jimmy blushed, watching Rowena dig ice out of his freezer and dump everything into the blender.

“There’s very little my brother doesn’t tell me,” Rowena informed him smugly, popping the lid on and hitting the start button. She let the machine do its thing, pausing to add more tequila and orange juice before blending it all down to slush.

Jimmy gulped at that, wondering how much detail Cold was giving her. He must have looked properly horrified because Rowena started laughing again.

“Oh! Sweetie!” Rowena patted his arm gently. “Don’t you fret, he doesn’t tell me everything. What you boys do behind closed doors is none of my business. Whips and chains, all that, don’t care!”

Jimmy briefly daydreamed about Cold tying him up and quickly aborted. He did not need to catch wood while hanging out with Cold’s sister.

Rowena found a plate, poured a glittering liquor onto it, then pouted at Jimmy. “Don’t suppose you have margarita glasses, do you?”

“No,” Jimmy replied, scratching the back of his neck with a shy grin. “Uhm, but I have these?” He reached into the cabinet above the sink and pulled out two very cheerful Christmas mugs. One was a reindeer, and the other was a snowman. “They’re clean at least.”

“Awww, they’re adorable!” Rowena squeaked, eagerly accepting them. She dipped the rims in the liquor on the plate and sprinkled salt all along the damp edges, before pouring in the contents of the blender and holding her chosen reindeer mug out in a toast. “Cheers!”

“Cheers,” Jimmy chuckled, gently tapping the snowman mug against hers. He was honestly a little concerned about the taste having seen how much tequila had made it into the blender. Taking a dainty sip, he was surprised to find that it was quite delicious. He smacked his lips, an unexpected taste pleasantly tingling on his tongue. “Is that... cinnamon?”

“Yup!” Rowena said proudly. “It’s Goldschlager. I always put it on the rim of the glass, in the glass, wherever. I love that stuff.”

“Pretty tasty,” Jimmy agreed, taking another sip.

Rowena hopped up on the counter, perching contently as she drank. “Now, here’s the plan, Jimmy,” she said, her lips curling smugly. “First, we make the margaritas. Then we drink the margaritas. Then we make more, and we drink those, too.”

“And when we run out?”

“Then we go shopping,” Rowena said with a grin.

Jimmy let out a low whistle. The drinks were strong, and there was still a generous amount of slush left in the blender. “And we’re gonna drink all of that?”

“Need to get you good and liquored up so you’ll tell me everything I want to know,” Rowena said with a bright smile.

Jimmy didn’t know how good of an idea that was. “You could just ask me,” he said, fidgeting anxiously. “I mean, I can’t promise you I’ll answer everything.”

“In that case, definitely keep drinking,” Rowena commanded playfully.

“Shit,” Jimmy chuckled and took another swallow. It had been a very long time since he’d had any alcohol, and it wasn’t going to take much to get him good and pliable for Rowena’s interrogating.

“So, are you from Strassen Springs?” Rowena chirped curiously.

“Born and raised,” Jimmy replied easily. These kinds of questions he could handle.

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“Only child.”

“Parents?”

“My dad is... around. Sort of. It’s complicated. And my mom... she died when I was very little.”

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry,” Rowena said, her lips pouting softly. “My mom died when I was really little, too. So did Roddy’s.”

“I’m sorry.” Jimmy meant it. He knew all too well the pain of losing a parent. He drank some more, brave enough to ask, “You and Cold don’t have the same mother?”

“Oh! No!” Rowena laughed loudly. “Boris, our father, was really big into spreading his seed anywhere he could. There’s probably a dozen of us little Legrands running around Central, but Roddy and I are the only ones he ever claimed. And that’s because he had to, you know...” She trailed off expectantly.

Jimmy shrugged helplessly, clearly confused. He had no idea what Rowena was talking about.

“You really don’t know anything about us,” Rowena said, amazed by the depth of his ignorance. “Okay, so. My mother was one of Don Rafaello Luchesi’s cousins. The Luchesi family that used to control Strassen Springs?”

“Right,” Jimmy said, nodding. “The ones Cold ran off.”

“Yup. This was while they were like at the height of their power. Because my mother was part of the family, Boris had to step up and marry her. They stayed together until I was, eh, four? She left and we never heard from her again until the cops called us to identify her body.”

“Jesus, I’m really sorry,” Jimmy said, cringing in sympathy. “What happened?”

“It’s okay, really,” Rowena assured him. “Super long time ago. And well, she was drunk. Ran a stoplight, crashed her car.” She shrugged. “I don’t really remember her very well to be honest, so, it’s hard to miss somebody you didn’t really know.”

“What about Cold’s mom?” Jimmy was dying for any information about his mysterious business partner.

“She was a jazz singer in one of the Luchesi family’s clubs. Suzanne de Villeneuve. Fancy, right? Ah, she was so gorgeous,” Rowena gushed. “I’ll have to show you a picture of her tonight, she was just fuckin’ beautiful.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, duh, Cold is hosting the party at his house,” Rowena explained with a roll of her eyes, quickly getting back on track. “Anyway. She was this super popular singer, like, was working on a record deal until she got pregnant with Roddy. The Luchesis were super pissed with Boris for putting their little rising star outta commission.

“She was gonna go back to her singing career after she had him because the Luchesis were gonna get profits off her record sales. They were the ones that were fundin’ her, you see. There was all this pressure on her to perform again as soon as possible. But she died right after giving birth to Roddy, and ohhh, the Luchesis were furious with Boris. They blamed him for gettin’ her knocked up.”

Jimmy was aghast as he listened to the intense tale, not even realizing he had finished his drink until he tried to take another sip and found the mug empty. Rowena was quick to notice, refilling it and topping off her own.

“Don Rafaello said Boris and baby Roddy owed him all this money because it was their fault Suzanne died,” Rowena went on. “So, Roddy was literally born as like a fuckin’ mafia indentured servant. He’s been working for them since he could fuckin’ crawl. Odd jobs at first, dirtier stuff as he got older. Roughin’ people up, robbing places, whatever they wanted.”

Jimmy frowned, his heart aching for the man that Cold might have become had he been born in a different world. He gulped back his drink, hissing at the brain freeze as he asked, “Wait. Okay, not that I don’t appreciate it, but... why are you telling me all of this?”

“Well, it’s not like any of it is a big secret,” Rowena drawled. “And besides, you need to know if you and Roddy are gonna keep seeing each other.”

Jimmy blushed. “It’s just, uh, a business deal.”

“Right,” Rowena snorted. “Because my brother totally does this all the time.” She cackled wickedly, pouring the last of the slush from the blender into their glasses with an additional splash of Goldschlager.

“Doesn’t he?” Jimmy pressed, frowning. “I mean, not like all the time... but...”

“Despite whatever Maury the Mouth told you, no, he does not. He may not admit it, but you’re the first person to get this kinda deal.”

Jimmy didn’t know what to say to that, filling the silence with more alcohol. It made him question his current circumstances even more. What exactly had he gotten himself into?

“I know screwin’ around for a few days may not seem like a really big deal to you, but trust me,” Rowena said, sliding off the counter, “it totally is. He likes you. And maybe if you know more about Cold and try to understand him, well...” She smiled hopefully. “Maybe you’ll get the chance to get to know Roddy.”

“I’d like that,” Jimmy admitted. The alcohol was making him warm all over, and soon he couldn’t stop smiling at the thought of actually being close to Roddy.

No, Cold. His deal was with Cold.

Jimmy remembered Maury’s warning about his heart and his dick getting mixed up, drowning the thought with another drink.

“Yeah, figured you might,” Rowena said with a wink. She chugged the rest of her drink, setting the empty mug in the sink. Gesturing for Jimmy to do the same, she huffed, “Come on.”

Jimmy nodded obediently, tipping the mug back. He frowned when he saw Rowena leaving the kitchen and making a beeline right to his room. “Uhm, what are you doing?” He chased after her.

“Roddy said you needed a new wardrobe,” Rowena said as if what she was up to was obvious, already digging through his closet and then moving to his dresser.

“Pretty sure he just meant for the party?” Jimmy said, watching her thumb through his underwear drawer in horror.

“Pretty sure I can interpret it however I want,” Rowena challenged with a big smile. “And, okay, yeah. You need some new threads, sweetie.” She picked up a rather dismal pair of boxer briefs that had several holes in them. “Desperately.”

“Oh, God,” Jimmy giggled, wishing he could sink into the floor. He was already feeling pretty buzzed, and his legs felt like rubber. He leaned against the wall and pressed his hands to his face, groaning, “I know, it’s so bad.”

Rowena giggled, enjoying his embarrassment as she started prancing to the door. She left all of the margarita supplies except the bottle of Goldschlager, shoving that down into her big purse.

“Don’t you worry. Roe is gonna take care of you. Come along, sweetie,” she cooed with a waggle of her brows. “We’ve got some serious work to do.”

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# Chapter Seven

It was a very good thing Rowena had arrived in a limo because neither she nor Jimmy were in any shape to drive. They stumbled out of Jimmy's apartment building together, arm in arm, laughing and chatting. It was so easy to be comfortable around Rowena. Her warm and happy energy was positively infectious. They piled into the backseat, Jimmy in awe of the plush accommodations.

"I've never been in a limo before," he confessed, stretching out his long legs over the seat.

Rowena sat opposite him next to the built-in bar, pulling out the bottle of booze from her purse with a giggle. "Oh, it's just the fucking best, Rod spoils me rotten." She grinned at Jimmy, poking at his feet playfully. "He'll spoil you, too, you know."

Jimmy put his hands over his face, hiding a tipsy smile. "Ohhhh, come on."

"I'm just saying. Roddy is very good to the people he cares about," Rowena said, picking up a small phone that connected her to the driver. "Jerry? Hi! Yeah, we're ready. The usual, but save Volturo's for last. Thanks!"

Jimmy wasn't sure if Cold truly cared or if he was merely invested in their deal. The way Rowena kept talking about it was giving Jimmy a lot of hope that he wasn't sure he should hold onto. He watched Rowena hang up the phone and pour them drinks, mixing in a clear citrus soda and a splash of grenadine.

She had clearly done this many times, able to pour the drinks with the limo in motion without ever spilling a drop. She practically shoved the glass into Jimmy's hand, cheering him, "Now! Here's to you, Jimmy Poe!"

"To me?" Jimmy didn't understand, but toasted anyway, sipping at the syrupy sweet concoction.

"Yes!" Rowena said, pointing a finger at him. "I haven't seen my brother this happy in a very long time."

Jimmy's cheeks were hot as he smiled bashfully. "I think you might be getting your hopes up about what exactly your brother wants from me."

"Trust me," Rowena said, arching her brow. "I know him better than anyone. The other night when we met at the hotel? I haven't fuckin' seen him smiling like that in years."

Jimmy knew exactly which smile she was referring to. "That... that was because of me?"

"Uh huh," Rowena mumbled over the rim of her glass as she drank. "Sure was. I don't know what you're doing to him, but keep doing it, okay?"

"Will do," Jimmy giggled.

They arrived at the first store, and as Jimmy crawled out of the limo, he realized he was really out of his league. They were in the uptown shopping district, and he had never felt so out of place. Rowena seemed to sense his discomfort, looping their arms together again.

"Hey, don't worry about it," she purred. "We're gonna *Pretty Woman* the fuck outta you, okay?"

Jimmy laughed as Rowena dragged him into the store. She wasn't kidding about buying him an entirely new wardrobe, the sales attendants barely able to keep up with her grabbing things from the racks and tossing them into his arms.

Button-down shirts of all colors and patterns, vintage band t-shirts, slim fitted jeans, lots of jeans, shoes, more shoes.

Jimmy stared in awe at Rowena making her rounds through the store. She never once stopped to look at a price tag. She'd sporadically pause to glance back at Jimmy, squint as if lost deep in thought, and then continue on. If she couldn't make a decision between two items of clothing, she simply bought both.

It was the same everywhere they went, from one store to the next, Rowena bought whatever she wanted for Jimmy and eventually started letting him pick out some things for himself, too.

“I had to make sure your fashion taste could be trusted,” she teased him while dragging a few dresses for herself back toward the fitting area at the latest boutique.

This was the fourth store. Or was it the fifth? Jimmy was undeniably sloshed, but he was having a fantastic time. “I don’t have bad fashion taste,” he protested with a drunken giggle. “I’m just freakin’ poor as hell!”

“I know, I’ve seen your apartment,” Rowena said with a tiny snicker, gesturing for him to sit down on some funky shaped ottomans that were arranged together in front of the fitting rooms. “We need to get you out of there, like immediately.”

“Can’t afford it,” Jimmy sighed as he plopped down on the inviting cushions. “Sort of not really working, you know?”

“Ugh, just ask Roddy for money,” Rowena groaned, stepping into the fitting room. She continued to talk, calling out, “You’ve got bills to pay, right? And you can’t survive on an exclusively protein diet, sweetie!”

Jimmy’s face blushed furiously. “I don’t want him to be, like, my sugar daddy? I need a job, Rowena. This arrangement we have isn’t gonna last forever.”

Rowena came flouncing out of the fitting room wearing a slinky golden dress with an open back that showed off the full graceful length of her spine. She gave a few spins, checking herself in every adjacent mirror, glancing over her shoulder back at Jimmy.

“You’re definitely not giving yourself enough credit, sweetie pie,” she cooed, “but if you’re so worried about it, why don’t you just ask Roddy for a job then? He owns a bunch of clubs, a restaurant. He could totally get you something legit.”

“I mean, I guess I could,” Jimmy said, rolling over on his stomach and stretching across the plush ottomans. He peered up at Rowena, his eyes again wandering to the mangled collection of scars dancing up and down her back.

“What is it?” Rowena asked, quirking a brow when she felt Jimmy staring at her.

“Can I ask you...” Jimmy rubbed his face, a little too intoxicated to find a polite way to pose his question. “Uh...”

“The scars?” Rowena replied, her bubbly charm not fizzling for a second.

“Shit, I’m so sorry,” Jimmy said, instantly ashamed for asking. “It’s none of my business, I’m an asshole—”

“No! It’s okay,” Rowena said with a light laugh. “They’re from Boris.”

“Boris Legrand, your father?” Jimmy tried not to look absolutely horrified, but he had zero control over his face. “I am so freakin’ sorry... I... I didn’t know.”

“They’re just scars,” Rowena said with a sad smile. “I was so little, honestly, I don’t remember how I got most of them. Or maybe I just blocked it all out, who the fuck knows. It’s no big secret that Boris used to abuse the fuck out of us. Especially Roddy. God. Boris really hated him.”

Jimmy began to connect the dots even in his drunken state, asking softly, “Is that why Cold... uh, doesn’t...”

“Doesn’t take off his clothes?” Rowena replied bluntly. “Yeah, that’s why. He’s very funny about his scars. See, me, I love showing them off. I love knowing what I survived. But Roddy...” She bit her lip as if hesitating how much she should share. “Well...”

“It’s okay,” Jimmy said quickly. “I get it. I mean, I don’t, but I do? I’m just... I can’t believe someone, anyone, would do that to their own kids.”

“You know, I’ve actually had a lot of time to think about it,” Rowena said, lips curling into a contemplative pout. “I used to think that maybe Boris did the things he did to us because he never got over Suzanne dying. Maybe that’s why he was so cruel, especially to Roddy, since he blamed him for losing her.

“I had thought, oh, that’s why he was horrible to my mother, drove her to drink herself into a fuckin’ oblivion, because she wasn’t Suzanne. And so, that’s why he hurt me; since her leaving couldn’t possibly be his fault, it was obviously mine. He had to put the blame on someone else. Anyone else but himself. But there was no excuse for all of the horrible shit he did. Me

and Roddy sure as fuck didn't deserve it. So. Turns out Boris was just a fuckin' monster. That's all."

"Was?" Jimmy echoed quietly.

"Ugh, I keep forgetting you live under a rock," Rowena snorted. "Yeah, sweetie. Very much 'was.' He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Uh huh," Rowena said, adjusting the straps of the dress and returning to scrutinize her reflection. "Roddy killed him."

Jimmy thought he was going to be sick, his hand clasping over his mouth, gasping in horror. "Wait, are you serious? He killed him? Wait, is this like secret mob stuff I'm not supposed to know about, oh, fuck—"

"Pffffft! No, please," Rowena giggled at how flustered Jimmy was. "Roddy served time for it. Two years for voluntary manslaughter."

"That's it?" Jimmy was in shock and suddenly angry. Cold had killed his own father and had gotten a damn slap on the wrist, whereas David, who was innocent, had received a life sentence. It made him absolutely furious with their justice system, and it also left him feeling conflicted about his growing affection for Cold.

It wasn't up to Jimmy to decide if a man like Boris Legrand deserved to die for his crimes, though it was clear that he was not a good person. He had known about Cold's reputation, but he had never directly acknowledged that the man he was currently sleeping with was a murderer.

There was a tiny voice protesting in the back of Jimmy's mind that at least it had been a horrible guy who the world was better off without and not some innocent person. He was surprised at himself for how quick he switched to defending what Cold had done.

Jimmy wasn't sure if that was to make himself feel better about sleeping with Cold, or if he truly believed that some crimes were acceptable depending on the circumstances.

Trying to decide if murder was ever justified was not a debate Jimmy's alcohol-addled brain was equipped to handle. He sat up, resting his face in

his hands, shaking his head as he said, “Wow... just two whole years, huh?”

“Uh huh,” Rowena drawled, returning to the fitting room to change again. “Boris tried putting his hands on Roddy, and well, Roddy decided it was going to be the last time.”

“And that’s why Rod—shit, I mean Cold, that’s why he doesn’t like to be touched,” Jimmy added quietly. “Because of Boris.”

Rowena stepped back out in her original outfit with the golden dress draped over her arm, offering a sympathetic smile. “Yeah,” she said, “and well... there’s some other shit. It’s just... ugh.”

“What is it?” Jimmy asked with a frown.

Rowena sighed, her hands on her hips as she struggled to find the right thing to say. “For Roddy, it’s all about trust. It’s not that he doesn’t like to be touched, I mean, fuck. I think he fuckin’ craves it. But it has to be on his terms. You just need to be patient with him, okay?”

“I can do that.” Jimmy nodded, perhaps too eagerly, quickly added, “You know, because of our deal.”

“Right,” Rowena said slyly. “The deal.”

“Yup,” Jimmy said indignantly, breaking into a big, goofy grin, “and that’s all I’m gonna say.”

“Mmmm, then it sounds like you need another drink,” Rowena taunted, grabbing Jimmy’s hands and hauling him to his feet. “We’ve got just one more stop to go! We’ve gotta get your suit for tonight, and we can drink on the way.”

“More drinking?” Jimmy laughed incredulously, delighted by Rowena’s wicked cackling.

“Duh!” She bought the dress and dragged him back to the limo, another round poured in seconds as they toasted again.

“Thank you,” Jimmy said, gulping back his drink before Rowena tried to cram it down his throat. “Seriously.”

“For what?” Rowena asked, cocking her head curiously.

“For this. All of this!” Jimmy exclaimed, moving to sit right beside her with a sweet grin. “I can’t remember the last time I just, like, hung out with someone. And the clothes, my God, you didn’t have to do so much for me. I’ve been having so much fun. This is just... it’s amazing. You’re amazing.”

“Awww, sweetie!” Rowena gushed, throwing her arms around Jimmy and hugging him tight. “I know I’m amazing, you don’t have to tell me. But seriously, I’m happy to doll you up. It’s been fun!”

“Thank you! Today is just... wow. Today has been a super crazy day. I still can’t actually believe this is really happening to me.”

“You just wait until the party,” Rowena promised, waggling her eyebrows. “We are gonna have an awesome time.”

Jimmy grinned. “You really are an incredible woman, Miss Legrand.”

“Come on, quit with that mushy shit,” Rowena groaned, giggling drunkenly. “You’ve gotta stay in awesome happy party mode.”

“Right, so, what is the party for? Is it someone’s birthday?” Jimmy asked, making a face as he took another sip of his very sweet drink.

“It’s a welcome home party,” Rowena chimed happily. “Mickey Tamerlane just got out of jail.”

“Mickey Tamerlane? The Shadow?” Jimmy’s jaw dropped. “Isn’t he... a hitman?”

“Yup!” Rowena said with a sly grin. “He’s one of Cold’s original Gentlemen.”

“Who?” Jimmy asked helplessly. He really needed to get a computer.

“The Gentlemen, that’s our little family of criminals,” Rowena explained with a happy grin. “The best of the best of Strassen Springs’ not so law-abiding citizens. None of them are Italian, you see, so the Luchesis never really wanted anything to do with them. Pretty much treated them all like trash, said none of them were worth a fuck. But along came Roddy, who definitely has no love for the Luchesis, and he brought them all together. He could see how much potential they had, and he formed his own family, the Gentlemen. That’s how he was able to run the Luchesis out of town.”

“So, that’s who’s gonna be there tonight?” Jimmy squeaked. “All the Gentlemen?”

“Don’t worry,” Rowena soothed, “they’re all loyal to Roddy and if he says hands off, you have absolutely nothing to worry about. It’s only the closest family there tonight, and everybody is chill. Ugh, except that creep Corman, but don’t worry about him. He’s just weird.”

Rowena considered for a moment, sipping at her drink as she added, “And well, Tamerlane is a little feisty, but he’s just pissed off that Lorre cheated on him while he was locked up. Ugh, and truthfully, Pym would have never done it, but he thought Tamerlane and Lorre were through, but they really weren’t. It also pretty much killed Pym’s chances with Thirdsies, because Godddd, does Thirdsies hate Lorre because he fucked over his grandpa this one time.”

Jimmy shrugged helplessly, trying his best to follow along, but he didn’t know all of the names, and honestly it was beginning to sound like a crazy soap opera. “Lots of, uh, inter-company dating?” he tried, grasping at straws to keep up.

“Lots of angry, horny mobsters,” Rowena laughed, looking thoughtful for a long time. “You know, I wouldn’t say we’re like a gay mafia... but we’re like, totally the gay mafia.”

Jimmy couldn’t stop himself from laughing. “Really?”

“Well, not everybody,” Rowena replied with a playful wink, “but you see, that’s part of why a lot of these guys were snubbed by the Italians. They’re not exactly a real open-minded sort of folk, you feel me?”

“Got it,” Jimmy said, giving a little salute of understanding as he finished off his drink. “So, are you...?”

“What? Gay? Nah, I like boys, as many as I can get my hands on,” Rowena laughed, taking his glass as soon as it was emptied and filling it again despite Jimmy’s groans of protest. “I’m between fellas at the moment, last one didn’t end real pretty, but there’s one or two I got my eye on.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jimmy said conversationally, making a face as he tried to swallow down more alcohol. “What happened?”

Rowena’s bubbly aura visibly faded for a moment, shaking her head. “Nothing worth talking about, sweetie.” Her energy came back full force as the limo pulled to a stop, cheering, “Ah! We’re finally here! Come on!”

Volturo Designs was a surprisingly old-fashioned suit shop nestled in the heart of the uptown shopping district. Dark wood, heavy curtains, and dozens of beautiful suits on display everywhere Jimmy looked. He was afraid to touch anything, shoving his hands in his pockets as Rowena led him straight toward the back.

There was a stout young man who had apparently been expecting them, glancing impatiently at his watch as he cleared his throat. “Let me guess. Natural disaster, limo exploded, broke a nail?”

“Oh, Worley, I got all caught up playing dress-up with my brother’s new little friend,” Rowena pouted, she and Worley exchanging quick kisses on their cheeks. “Seriously, though, I need you to make me a miracle because we’ve got a huge party to go to tonight. In like, uhm.” She looked at the clock on the wall. “Oh, two hours?”

“Holy crap,” Jimmy gasped, staring at the time in shock. It was already after seven. He couldn’t believe how long he and Rowena had been out shopping.

“I’ve got this,” Worley said confidently, brushing Rowena out of his way. “Stand aside. Professional at work here.” He took one look at Jimmy, peering curiously as he said, “Let’s see... About a thirty-eight long? Oh, those legs. Okay. I’ve got just the thing.”

Rowena grinned and came back to retrieve Jimmy from where he had floundered, guiding him toward the private fitting rooms and happily shutting the door behind them. There was a large array of mirrors and plush leather furniture. “Don’t worry, I won’t peek,” she teased, covering her eyes.

“Wait, what am I doing?”

“You’re stripping,” Rowena informed him bluntly. “Worley is gonna have to measure you. These suits are made to order, but, hopefully with his genius little paws? The alterations won’t take long.”

Jimmy walked toward the mirrored area, frowning as he began to undress. He at least had his underwear left on, and Rowena wasn't peeking between her fingers as best as he could tell.

Worley came in with a bright smile, carrying a dark red suit over his arm. "Come on, handsome," he said, offering it out to Jimmy. "It's time to get you ready for the ball!"

"Let me know when I can look!" Rowena demanded.

"Can't rush perfection," Worley snapped back, rolling his eyes as he helped Jimmy get dressed.

The fabric felt wonderful against Jimmy's skin. It was a rich, deep scarlet, and he loved it immediately. Worley had selected a black button-up shirt and a white bowtie, leaving Jimmy gawking at himself in the reflection of the mirror when it was all on.

The suit fit very well, the pants showing off his long legs, and the jacket was tailored perfectly at his waist to flatter his slender build. He had never been a particularly vain person, but he couldn't stop from twisting and turning in front of the mirror.

Jimmy had never felt so handsome, smiling dopily to himself. He really hoped Cold liked it, surprised at himself by how much he valued Cold's approval. He also quickly realized there was no price tag on the outfit and gulped audibly. He did not want to know how much this cost.

Worley whistled, calling out to Rowena, "Behold! Perfection."

Rowena dropped her hands and squealed excitedly. "Yes! Oh, my God. Worley, where has this little gem been hiding?"

"It's an Oswald Original," Worley said proudly. "Rumor has it he made it personally for his hubby, but hubby haaated it. But he and your little friend are practically the same size. It's meant to be."

"We're getting it," Rowena insisted immediately. "Do whatever you have to do. We have to leave with this in two hours."

Worley snapped his fingers at Jimmy to stand up on a small footstool, having him turn away from the mirror. He produced a measuring tape,

moving Jimmy back around a few times, casually cutting his eyes at Rowena as he said, “Terrible to hear about Dickie.”

“Yup, I’m all broken up about it,” Rowena replied in a voice that indicated she was anything but. Her whole body tensed, her eyes narrowing at Worley with a ferocious anger Jimmy had never seen.

Worley’s happy demeanor fell at that, saying quickly, “Well. Good news. I only have to let out the hem on the pants like half an inch. Shouldn’t take more than an hour.”

Jimmy swayed slightly, trying to hold as still as possible while the tailor made one last measurement. He frowned, curious, but cautious enough to wait before he inquired about Rowena’s odd reaction.

He stripped off the suit and started pulling his own clothes back on, waiting until Worley left before asking, “Who’s Dickie?”

“Dickie White,” Rowena said with a faint snarl curling her lip. “My ex-boyfriend.”

Jimmy scratched his head, asking out loud, “Why does that name sound so damn familiar.”

“Oh? Hadn’t you heard? It’s all over the news.” Rowena chuckled sourly. “That’s the guy whose murder they’re trying to pin on Roddy.”

Jimmy’s heart stopped. The case Augustus was investigating.

“Are you all right?” Rowena asked, sounding concerned. “Drink too much?”

“Yeah, just a little woozy,” Jimmy said lamely.

“Hey! Worley?” Rowena called out sweetly.

Worley poked his head in obediently, asking, “Yes, Miss Legrand?”

“Would you please be a dear and send someone over to Wendy’s for us? We need some grub to soak up some of this booze,” she purred, batting her eyes.

“Of course, Miss Legrand,” Worley said, the two of them sharing a small smile as they glanced at Jimmy. He felt positively green.

Jimmy sat down quickly in one of the plush chairs, swiping a hand through his hair. Crap, he was sweating. The murder case Augustus was looking into was Rowena’s ex-boyfriend. This couldn’t be good.

He stared nervously at Rowena, trying to smile. She had said something about the relationship not ending well. Well, crap, of course it hadn’t ended well if Cold killed the guy.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Rowena asked, frowning. Even drunk, she could tell something was amiss.

“Just too much to drink,” Jimmy replied with a weak smile, wishing for once he was a better liar.

“Don’t sweat it,” Rowena said, either not noticing the weak fib or ignoring it. “So! Excited about tonight?”

“Totally,” Jimmy said, and this time his smile was genuine.

They chatted about the party and Jimmy listened to Rowena’s gossip about the Gentlemen until the food arrived. Jimmy had never been so happy to see food, eagerly devouring two cheeseburgers by himself. It helped settle his stomach, and he was starting to feel much better.

Worley came back with the finished suit, claiming it was a masterpiece, and Rowena started cursing when she realized what time it was.

“Your masterpiece took longer than an hour!” Rowena wailed. “Fuck! We’re gonna be late!”

Rowena went out to the car to fetch some of Jimmy’s new shoes and socks, commanding him to get ready with a quickness. She left the room this time, taking Worley with her.

Jimmy quickly changed, but frowned at his underwear. They were another ratty pair of boxer briefs like the ones Rowena had teased him about. It didn’t feel right to wear something so awful with such a nice suit. He decided to be daring and skip undergarments all together, smiling proudly to himself as he finished getting dressed.

When Jimmy looked in the mirror, he saw a completely different person. He was happy.

He ignored the heaviness creeping into his heart thinking about Augustus' investigation. He knew Cold was a murderer, no doubt about it. Rowena had even said he served time for killing their father. But when they were together, none of that mattered. Cold became his whole world, and Jimmy found he didn't care about the terrible things the man had done.

Being with Cold made him feel complete.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded at himself resolutely. If this deal with Cold was going to amount to anything more, he had to be honest with him. He was going to tell Cold the truth about Augustus. Tonight.

Jimmy balled up his old clothes and stepped out of the room for Rowena's approval. She squealed in delight, quickly fussing with his hair. After a spray of cologne, she deemed him fit for the party.

"So, just how late are we going to be?" Jimmy asked once they were back in the limo.

"Mmmm, late enough to make an entrance," Rowena said with a wicked smile. She had dragged her new golden dress into the back with them, pointing at Jimmy and giggling, "Now, I've gotta get ready! No peeking!"

Jimmy obediently closed his eyes, although he was tempted to open them out of concern at all the bumping around he heard. "You okay?"

"Okay, all good," Rowena announced. "Ta-dah!"

Jimmy opened his eyes, grinning to see Rowena changed into her new dress with matching glittering heels, makeup already done, and her hair swept back in an elegant pouf of curls. He laughed, clapping. "Very impressive."

"Might have had to get dressed in the back of a car once or twice in my life," she teased with a wink. She picked up the phone, twisting the cord around her finger and grinning as she said, "Hey, Jerry? Beautiful, handsome, gorgeous Jerry? Light of my life, apple of my eye? Step on it, babe. We got a fuckin' party to get to!"

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# Chapter Eight

Cold's compound was a massive estate consisting of a mansion, a large conservatory, and a grand pool watched over by elaborate marble statues. It was surrounded by a tall iron fence, and the grounds were patrolled constantly by armed guards.

With dogs. Wow.

Jimmy's face was pressed up against the window of the limo, staring in awe as they were ushered through the gates. He had never seen any place so incredible except in movies.

The limo pulled right up to the front of the mansion, an attendant opening the door and offering his hand to assist Rowena out.

"Thanks," she cooed, gracefully exiting the limo. She had her giant purse under her arm, batting her eyes as she asked, "Would you be a dear and take the bags in the trunk upstairs? You can put them all in Roddy's room. Thanks, dear!"

Jimmy stumbled after Rowena, his jaw still dropped as he looked all around. He couldn't believe any of this was real. He was immediately afraid to touch anything when they walked inside, eyes wide as he tried to take everything in.

It was modern, simple, clean. Cold liked dark, cool colors and strong, bold furniture. There were no pictures that Jimmy could see, no art or sculptures, but there were dozens of fresh calla lilies scattered all throughout the house. Their fragrance was faint, but inviting amongst the cold decor.

Rowena carelessly dropped her purse on a nearby table, grabbing Jimmy's hand and giggling, "Come on!" She started marching through the long hallways, heels clicking as she called out sweetly, "Roddy! Where are you?" After a few turns and still no answer, she impatiently shrieked, "Rod, where the fuck are you at!"

"In the den!" Cold yelled back, annoyed. "For fuck's sake, Rowena!"

Rowena smiled triumphantly, leading Jimmy toward the source of her brother's voice.

Like the rest of the house, the den was spacious and uncluttered. There were a few plush leather sofas arranged around a glass-top coffee table. There was a large bar, fully stocked, adjacent to a fireplace that dominated the room and bathed it in amber flickering light from the flames.

Cold stood by the fireplace, dressed to kill in a dark three-piece pinstripe suit. His cufflinks glittered with the sparkle of diamonds, and he was wearing white spats over his shoes. He looked every bit the gangster king as Jimmy had ever seen him.

Jimmy wanted to drop to his knees on the floor at the very sight of him.

Cold turned his head when he and Rowena entered, and he had the strangest look on his face when he saw Jimmy. He was lost and suddenly found all in the space of a few seconds, his usual smirk sliding into place.

Tilting his head, he purred approvingly, "Why, Mr. Poe. You clean up well."

"I do good work," Rowena chirped proudly, heading right to the bar to make drinks.

Jimmy couldn't stop the dopey smile that tumbled onto his face, beaming at Cold as he gushed, "Wow. Me? Thanks, but I mean, look at you! You look incredibly fuckin' sexy."

Cold's cheeks turned pink.

The mob boss of Strassen Springs was actually blushing.

"Come here," Cold commanded softly, beckoning Jimmy over with a finger.

Jimmy kept grinning, tipsy enough to be brave and lean close as he approached with a loud whisper in Cold's ear, "I'm not wearing any underwear."

Cold's hand snapped up to the back of Jimmy's neck before he could get too close, but he was smiling softly. With a gasp, Jimmy leaned into Cold's hand. He could feel his thumb lightly brushing over the little hairs on the back of his neck, and he shivered pleasurably.

Cold’s eyes hungrily flicked over Jimmy’s body. “Duly noted.”

Jimmy wobbled a little, resisting the urge to hold onto Cold for support.

“How much booze did my sister pump into you?” Cold asked with a soft chuckle, taking in Jimmy’s flushed face and glassy eyes.

“Just the right amount!” Rowena replied, laughing.

“We had a really, really nice day, and we maybe had a lot to drink, but I’m super okay,” Jimmy said. “Thank you. Seriously. For everything.”

He adored how warmly Cold was looking at him, and Jimmy was suddenly consumed by the desire to peel that suit right off, and get on top of him, and oh, mmph. Shit. Not now. Focus. He had to focus.

Talk. He needed to talk.

*Augustus*.

Jimmy pulled himself out of his lustful daze, licking his lips as he said cautiously, “Could we maybe... talk? Somewhere private?”

“So eager, are we?” Cold snorted, misreading his request as he watched Jimmy’s tongue. “Later. Right now, you’re to be seen, not heard. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy replied quietly.

Rowena was cutting up lemons, interrupting as she demanded, “Where the hell is everyone? Or are they all late, too?”

“Believe it or not, dear sister, you’re the first ones here,” Cold drawled, his hand still resting on Jimmy’s neck and petting his hair softly. He nodded toward the nearest sofa, wordlessly urging him to go sit down.

Jimmy mourned the loss of contact, but he obeyed, taking a seat on the couch nearest Cold. There was a loud commotion from somewhere off in the mansion, Cold tilting his head as his sister brought him a drink.

“Mmm, not anymore.”

Jules Price came barging in, no jacket, no tie, and his shirt was distinctly singed across the front. He was grinning, stopping dead in his tracks when he saw Jimmy lounging on the sofa. He burst into a hearty laugh. “Hey! Twig! Comin’ on up in the world.”

Jimmy waved awkwardly, remembering Cold’s command about staying quiet.

Jules gave Cold a smug smile, grinning slyly as he teased, “You’re so full of shit.”

“Fuck off, Jules,” Cold said affectionately. “Have a drink.”

Jimmy briefly wondered what Jules was taunting Cold about, but kept his curiosity to himself.

Rowena was enjoying her role as bartender, pouring a tumbler of something dark, maybe whiskey. “Hey, Jules!” she said, offering out the drink.

“Heya, Roe,” Jules rumbled, grabbing the glass and knocking it back in one go. Rowena refilled it and he drank it again with a happy hiss. “Damn, hit me again.”

“Easy, tiger,” Rowena teased, topping him off once more.

“Any sign of the guest of honor?” Cold drawled.

“Oh, yeah, he’s here. Last I saw him, he had Lorre ass-up in the back of his Nova,” Jules chuckled, choosing to sip his drink now instead of chugging it.

“Aw, so they’re getting back together?” Rowena said, sounding hopeful.

“Didn’t think Lorre had ever gotten around to apologizing,” Cold said with a faint smirk.

“Ass-up ain’t a bad way to start apologizing,” Jules said. “Fuck if I know, though.”

Jimmy watched the three of them interact, the camaraderie and love obvious between them all. They really were a family. He still wasn’t sure how Jules fit, but it was clear that he belonged with the Legrand siblings.

Rowena came around the bar, bringing a fruity-looking cocktail to Jimmy. “Here ya go, sweetie.” She winked playfully.

Jimmy mouthed his gratitude, smiling happily. He could handle this. It was just a little party. Nothing to freak out over.

Then he saw a familiar face walk in, and maybe, just maybe, it was okay to freak out a little bit.

Mickey Tamerlane appeared at the doorway, as silent as his nickname—The Shadow—his dark eyes roaming over the room. His face was blank, his mouth drawn tight in serious concentration.

Jimmy recognized him from the news and sank down into the couch cushions. The assassin was ten times more terrifying in person. He was a gaunt snake of a man and his gaze was intense; Jimmy was glad it wasn’t directed anywhere near him.

Just a party, he reminded himself. For this guy. Who had just gotten out of prison for killing lots of people.

Tamerlane was looking for Cold, and quickly approached him with a respectful bow of his head.

“Tamerlane,” Cold said with a slight growl as he held the last syllable. “Good to see you.”

Tamerlane knelt, kissing Cold’s hand with a soft sigh. “Boss.”

Cold flinched, but allowed it, patting Tamerlane’s shoulder. “We’re glad to have you back.”

Rowena already had a drink ready, a martini loaded with olives, and handed it to the assassin as he rose to his feet. She stood on her toes to kiss his cheek. “We’ve missed you, Mickey!”

Tamerlane gave a crooked, rueful smile as he accepted the drink. “It’s good to be back.” His quick eyes found Jimmy, an unfamiliar face at his special party. “Who’s the twink?”

Jimmy had been watching the spectacle, trying to grasp the inner workings of the varying power dynamics at play here, but all he could think about

was being on his knees like that for Cold. He inhaled sharply when he realized everyone was staring at him.

“Oh, he’s mine,” Cold purred, and Jimmy swore he detected a hint of pride.

Tamerlane leered, chuckling quietly as he said, “A lot has changed since I’ve been in the clink, eh?”

“Mmmm. Some,” Cold admitted, a sly smile gracing his handsome face. “Jimmy, this is Mickey Tamerlane. Tamerlane, Jimmy.”

Jimmy waved anxiously, but fortunately Tamerlane wasn’t very interested in him. He tilted his head in greeting, but his gaze was quickly diverted to the doorway as another guest entered.

The newly arrived Gentleman was handsome and scruffy, his cheeks a bit rosy. He and Tamerlane exchanged coy smiles, and Jimmy correctly identified him as Roger Lorre.

“Hey, Boss,” Lorre said, opting for a handshake instead of dropping to his knees. “Jules, Rowena.” He nodded at them as he spoke their names, offering a larger smile for the last. “Tamerlane.”

“Hey,” Tamerlane said casually, as if they hadn’t been locked together in passion’s most intimate embrace only a little while ago if Jules was to be believed.

Lorre smiled at Jimmy, a bit puzzled. “And who the hell are you? Don’t I know you from someplace?”

“He’s with Cold,” Tamerlane informed him with an envious snarl. “So, don’t get any ideas.”

“One fucking time!” Lorre passionately exploded, all pretenses of them being mere acquaintances lost. “I fuck up one fucking time—”

“Six,” Tamerlane corrected, his stoic demeanor crumbling as he shouted, “You fucked up six times, and once was with Pym!”

A tall man with glasses and red hair had popped up at the door, but hearing the name turned him right around and sent him scurrying back down the hallway as Tamerlane and Lorre continued to bicker.

A few seconds later he was brought back under duress by a tall, slim fellow who looked no older than Jimmy, along with a wild-eyed man who had to at least be in his sixties.

Jimmy was actually glad he was only serving as a spectator. The chaos was a glorious train wreck. There was a rush of hugging and cheering for Tamerlane by the new arrivals, but Tamerlane was more interested in screaming at Lorre for his rampant infidelity. The older man was egging them on, encouraging Tamerlane to take a poke at the man with the glasses while the tall fellow laughed.

Jimmy listened intently, quickly picking up on all their names despite the lack of introductions.

Theodore Pym. That was the redhead with the glasses who very much did not want to get hit and was trying to back away as quickly as possible.

The old man was Francis Von Valdemar, and the laughing fellow was Thirdsies, so named because he was Francis Von Valdemar III. As Valdemar's grandson, the pair represented both the youngest and oldest members of the Gentlemen.

Cold swept into the fray like a ringmaster, separating Lorre and Tamerlane while pushing Pym off onto a clearly receptive Thirdsies. He sent Valdemar over to busy himself at the bar, telling lewd jokes. Cold had to keep pulling Jules away from cutlery when he started to fidget, pausing to exchange a smile with his sister as she passed out a fresh round of booze.

It was the most dysfunctional family reunion Jimmy had ever witnessed, the mania perfectly lubricated by all the alcohol Rowena was too eager to pour. Jimmy shook his head, realizing how easy it was to forget they were all murderers and criminals.

Cold had been ignoring Jimmy for most of the evening, playing host and mediator to his Gentlemen as time ticked by. He would still occasionally glance over and smirk at Jimmy, giving hungry little looks that made him shudder. For his part, Jimmy was content to sit and look pretty, enjoying the fruity concoctions Rowena kept feeding him.

His next drink was brought to him by Cold himself, his long fingers gently tracing over the nape of Jimmy's neck as he said, "I'll be right back. Gotta have a little private chat with Jules and Tamerlane."

Jimmy nodded obediently, peering earnestly up at Cold. He was truly enjoying himself, but it was hard to relax. "Then can we talk?" he asked hopefully.

"Maybe," Cold purred, his eyes raking over Jimmy's suited form. "We'll see."

Jimmy nodded, watching Cold leave with Tamerlane and Jules. The longer he had to wait, the more pent up he was starting to feel. If he didn't tell Cold the truth soon, he was going to burst.

He stood up, restless, moving to the fireplace to watch the flames. Sipping at his drink, he glanced around at the remaining occupants. None of them really paid much attention to him, and Jimmy was glad for it.

He didn't notice when another guest arrived since he returned his attention to the roaring fire until he heard Thirdsies groan a quiet, "Come on. *He's* here?"

"Sorry I'm late to the party," a smooth voice announced, prompting Jimmy to turn around again and see a blond man in a dark blue suit. Not entirely unhandsome, but there was something unsettling about him that gave Jimmy pause.

"Now, now," Valdemar scolded at Thirdsies, "don't be rude, sonny. Make sure he can hear you, poor bastard might be deaf!" He took a deep breath before shouting dramatically, "Oh, for the love of Goddddd and all that's holy! *He's* here?"

"Like that, huh?"

"Just like that." Valdemar nodded.

The newcomer did not look amused.

Rowena called out her drunken salutations, the other Gentlemen either mumbling or ignoring him completely. He didn't seem distressed by their dismissal of him, but his eyes immediately zeroed in on Jimmy.

“Well, hello there,” the man drawled, a bright smile lighting up his face as he approached.

“Hands off,” Rowena warned with a slight slur to her words. “He’s with my brother. My *brother’s*.”

“Oh, ho ho. What a sweet little princeling. And imagine that, for the king himself.” He snorted, looking Jimmy over curiously. “So, Cold left you here all by your lonesome?” the man asked with a mocking pout.

“He just, uh, he had to have a meeting,” Jimmy replied quickly, forcing a small smile and trying to be friendly. He didn’t know this gentleman, but there was something about him that made Jimmy uncomfortable.

The man was staring at Jimmy unabashedly, his eyes flicking over him from head to toe, like he either wanted to sleep with Jimmy or wear his skin. Maybe both.

Definitely creepy.

Jimmy fidgeted, his smile becoming more strained as he said, “I’m sure he won’t be much longer.”

The man suddenly advanced, so close now that Jimmy could see the blue of his eyes and his gaze was uncomfortably intense. He bowed his head as if they were about to share a secret, murmuring softly, “Do you know who I am?”

“Uh, no?” Jimmy replied, blinking as he took a step back to put some space between them. “I’m sorry, I’m not technically supposed to, uh, talk to anyone. I don’t... I don’t know who you are, sir.”

The man seemed to relax at that, his lips curling up thoughtfully. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t,” he said after a moment, allowing Jimmy to retreat to a comfortable distance. He smiled and extended his hand. “I’m Rufus Corman.”

“Hi,” Jimmy said, shaking his hand politely. “I’m Jimmy, Jimmy... You know, just Jimmy.”

“Jimmy Poe,” Corman supplied quietly with a cocky smirk, not letting go of his hand. He squeezed so hard it hurt, pulling him even closer as he

hissed, “You may not know me, but I definitely know who you are.”

Fuck.

Jimmy’s face flushed, as he frantically jerked his hand away. This wasn’t good. How did Corman know his name? How did he know who he was?

Lorre had been hovering a few yards away, watching Corman stalk Jimmy. He had come close enough that he could hear them, snapping suddenly, “Wait, Jimmy Poe? As in, Augustus Duplin’s kid?”

Corman scowled for a moment, but his polite expression returned in a blink. It seemed he hadn’t wanted to share his discovery with the rest of the class, but there was no point in hiding it now. “Indeed.”

Jimmy didn’t know what to do. Cold had told him to stay put, but all he wanted to do right now was run like hell. Neither Corman nor Lorre looked very friendly.

“Oh, yeah, I knew you looked familiar. I fucking know you,” Lorre sneered, glaring at Jimmy. “Your fucking dad killed my fucking brother. What the fuck! Does Cold fucking know who you are?”

“I-I don’t know anything about your brother,” Jimmy stammered, frantically backing himself against the wall with both Lorre and Corman closing in. “And Cold... uhm...”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Rowena shouted, stumbling as she came around the bar, struggling to sober up with a quickness. “What the fuck do you think you idiots are doing?”

Lorre jerked his head at Jimmy, snapping, “This is Augustus Duplin’s kid! Like, his adopted kid!”

“Oh, please. He is not,” Rowena groaned, but she blinked, staring curiously at Jimmy. There was doubt beginning to sneak in, her pretty lips curling into a frown. She looked hurt, asking him directly, “Are you?”

Jimmy’s eyes were wide with terror, trying to explain. “Yes, but fuck, look, we don’t ever talk, I ran away—”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Rowena demanded, clearly betrayed and upset.

“I kept trying!” Jimmy cried, frustrated and afraid. He yelped when Corman grabbed his collar, dropping his drink and wincing at the sound of shattering glass.

Corman pulled him roughly away from the fireplace and starting to drag him away. “Oh, I’ll take care of this little problem myself,” he promised, leering horribly at Jimmy.

Jimmy was scared, but he wasn’t going to go anywhere with Corman without a fight. He swung, trying to push him away, snapping, “Get the fuck off me!”

“Corman, let him go!” Rowena hissed, taking off one of her heels and rearing her arm back. “God fuckin’ help me, I will beat the brains out of your head with my fuckin’ Jimmy Choo if you don’t let him go!”

“Rowena, for fuck’s sake!” Lorre groaned. “That guy is a pig’s fuckin’ brat, probably came here to spy on us! You think it’s a coincidence that Duplin is all up Cold’s ass about Dickie, and now this guy just happens to show up?”

“I don’t care!” Rowena snarled, pointing her shoe at Lorre now. “Roddy said hands the fuck off, and I don’t see Roddy right now. Do you?”

“No, but—”

“But fuckin’ nothin’!” Rowena raged, her eyes snapping to Corman. “Get your nasty fuckin’ mitts off of him. We’ll let Roddy decide what to do. Until then, let him go.”

“I don’t take orders from you, Rowena,” Corman hissed dryly, and Jimmy tried to wiggle away again while he seemed distracted. Corman’s grip only tightened, suddenly crashing Jimmy’s face into his knee.

Jimmy collapsed to the floor, crying out in pain. His lip was split, and he could taste blood.

“You bastard!” Rowena seethed, flinging her shoe at Corman’s head. She missed by a mile and cursed loudly, reaching for her other heel.

“Easy now,” Corman chuckled, holding up his hands and easily batting away the other shoe as it came flying at his head. “Just a little tap. He’s fine.”

“You are such a fucking douche nozzle,” Rowena growled, dropping down to Jimmy’s side and wrapping her arms around him protectively. She glared up at Corman, snapping, “Ohhhh, Roddy is gonna fuck you up.”

“Over some cop’s kid? Please,” Corman sneered disgustedly. “Cold won’t fucking care, he’ll probably thank me!”

“And what exactly am I thanking you for?” Cold’s voice boomed suddenly, his eyes glittering with a fury Jimmy had never seen when he walked into the den with Jules and Tamerlane flanking either side of him.

Jules’ giant hands curled into fists, and Tamerlane had a gun drawn in a blink. They weren’t looking at Jimmy though, all of their wrath was aimed directly at Corman. Jimmy didn’t understand the reason for all the animosity, but it was very clear that no one was a fan of him.

Corman rolled his eyes, gesturing toward Jimmy as he said, “Your little escort here is not what he seems.”

“Cold, this kid is Augustus Duplin’s son,” Lorre snapped. “I knew I’d seen him before.”

“Same here,” Corman laughed. “Tell me, Jimmy. When’d ya start dying your hair? I kinda miss the blond.”

“What?” Jimmy touched his hair instinctively. He hadn’t been blond since middle school, and he couldn’t begin to imagine how any of these gangsters would know that.

“Tried finding him or Duplin’s daughter a year or so back,” Lorre snorted. “Looking for some payback for my brother. Couldn’t ever track ‘em down.”

Cold reached for Jimmy, his hands firm but gentle as he pulled him from Rowena’s arms and up to his feet. He cradled the back of Jimmy’s head, tilting his face toward him so he could get a better look at the damage.

Jimmy was shaking all over, his fingers curling tight around Cold’s wrist as his eyes filled with tears. This was it, Cold was going to kill him. He was

going to tear him into pieces and feed him to the damn dogs outside.

“Are you all right?” Cold asked quietly. His rage appeared to be simmering for the moment, but his expression was stern. He was letting Jimmy hold his wrist without protest, his icy blue eyes peering at him intently.

“I’m o-okay,” Jimmy stammered in surprise. He didn’t want this to end, no, not like this. He had to plead his case, he had to fight, trying desperately to explain. “Please. Listen. Look, I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I kept trying to tell you—”

“Shhhh, be quiet now,” Cold soothed, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing Jimmy’s bleeding lip.

Jimmy was stunned. Cold had to have heard the Gentlemen’s accusations, but he didn’t appear to care. He only seemed concerned with Jimmy, scrutinizing the wound once more with a little frown.

“What the fuck, Cold!” Lorre shouted, furious that Cold was ignoring them and was so caught up in Jimmy. “I demand fuckin’ blood for my brother. Let me have the kid! Are you listening to anything I’m sayin’? He’s Detective Duplin’s son!”

Cold did not look impressed by Lorre’s outburst, glaring at him heatedly as he calmly said, “Yes... I know.”

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# Chapter Nine

No one was more shocked than Jimmy. He was frozen in place, gawking stupidly at Cold. He knew. The gangster knew Augustus was his adopted father. Why? How? Jimmy's mind spun with questions, trying to stay grounded, but he was absolutely terrified.

Was this the part where Cold made him go sleep with the fishes? Cement shoes? Was this all some horrible trap?

"You brought that pig's fuckin' kid here? Why?" Lorre snarled.

"My intentions with Mr. Poe are none of your business," Cold said coolly, "but I can assure you he's no threat to any of you."

"What about my brother?" Lorre demanded.

"You'll get your blood debt some other way," Cold snarled back, baring his teeth. "You will not get it tonight, and you will certainly not get it from Mr. Poe."

Jimmy clung to Cold's wrist, staring at Lorre to see what he was going to do.

Lorre backed off, clearly not pleased, but loyal enough to stand down. "Fine, Boss," he said bitterly. "Whatever you say."

Tamerlane lowered his gun, moving to Lorre's side and resting his hand on his shoulder. They exchanged a brief glance, something tender and meaningful that was over all too fast when Corman snapped.

"I think not. I've got my own personal business with Detective Duplin." Corman's eyes zeroed in on Jimmy, adding nastily, "And I would love to tell Mr. Poe here all about it."

"Yeah? And let you put your fucking hands on him again?" Rowena growled, grabbing her shoes up from the floor. "I don't know what is going on here, but if you think you're gonna hurt Jimmy? Ohhh, I will rock your fucking skull with six inches of steel—"

"Rowena," Cold said, his voice quick and stern.

Rowena glared, but lowered the shoe.

The Gentlemen all watched silently, the air tense. There had been a serious violation of their decorum, and now it had to be corrected. They all seemed to know what was coming.

“Mr. Corman,” Cold said, his voice eerily calm. “I think you’re forgetting something very important here. We Gentlemen have rules.” Guiding Jimmy into Rowena’s arms, his eyes flickered to Jules in an unspoken command.

Jules grabbed Corman without question, roughly pinning his arms behind his back.

“Rule number one: I’m the boss.” Cold reared back and socked Corman right in his jaw with a deafening crack. He took a deep breath and hit him again, Corman’s nose crunching and starting to bleed.

“No! Wait!” Corman protested, struggling to free himself from Jules’ hold. “I meant no offense!”

“I’m the boss, and do you know what that means?” Cold calmly removed his jacket, offering it to Tamerlane for safekeeping. He stretched his neck and rolled his shoulders back as he took off his cufflinks. He put them in his pants pocket and began to roll up his sleeves. “It means you don’t touch what’s *mine*.”

A thick gush of blood was pouring out of Corman’s busted face, and Jimmy felt strange. His body was light, light as a feather, and he was floating. He wasn’t inside the mansion now. He was back at home, his family’s old home. He could see the knife hitting his mother in the chest over and over, he could see the blood.

The room began to spin, and the Man in the White Coat was there with the knife in his hand, laughing as his mother screamed for mercy. He couldn’t stop watching, and the Man in White’s face was a blank void.

He didn’t have a face, why didn’t he have a face? The void was melting away as he cackled, and everything went black.

“Jimmy? Jimmy!” It was Rowena’s voice calling to him as she cradled his face sweetly.

Jimmy stirred, groaning. A sharp slap across his cheek made him yelp.

“Aw, there. See?” Rowena cooed. “He’s fine!”

Jimmy opened his eyes, realizing he was on the floor. He saw Rowena hovering over him and Cold crouched next to her. Cold’s brow was furrowed, and Jimmy could have sworn he actually looked concerned. It made his heart skip a beat, waiting for the room to stop spinning.

“Are you okay?” Rowena asked with a little frown.

Jimmy looked around. “Is he... what happened? Where is everyone?”

“Corman left to go lick his booboos. Everybody else is out playing by the pool. You fainted, sweetie,” Rowena said, gently petting his hair. “No tummy for blood, huh?”

“I guess, uhm. No. Not really.” Jimmy groaned, struggling to sit up and staring at Cold. The gangster was dressed again as if nothing had happened, but there was a faint spray of blood spattered on his cheek that Jimmy couldn’t take his eyes off of.

Cold glanced at Rowena with a questioning look.

She cleared her throat, tapping her own cheek. “Got a little somethin’ on you.”

Cold made a face and stood up with a frustrated sigh. He took out his handkerchief, dabbing himself off. Everyone else had left the room except Jules, who was currently humming to himself as he wiped up some more blood from the floor.

Jimmy’s stomach twisted at the sight. “What... what did you do?”

“Oh, it was just a few little love taps,” Rowena reassured Jimmy, patting his shoulder. “Corman actually looks better with a broken nose!”

Jimmy was horrified. “Broke his...? Broke *his nose*?”

Cold scoffed at Jimmy’s reaction, stalking toward the bar to make himself a drink. He poured a second for Jules, sniping, “Should have taken his finger.”

“There’s still time,” Jules offered with a grin, joining him in a toast.

“Oh, my God,” Jimmy gasped, revulsion rising up to meet the bile dancing in the back of his throat.

Rowena frowned sympathetically. “Sweetie. Corman is bold, and he’s not exactly the most loyal Gentleman. This was a long time coming. You see, he was the last one to join, and he only did when it was clear Roddy was gonna win. Plus, he—”

“Rowena,” Cold warned. “I think that’s enough story time.”

“Oh, yeah?” Rowena hissed, jumping up and whirling around to face her brother. “Hey! How about you tell me a little story? Like why the fuck didn’t you tell me what you were up to!”

“I knew,” Jules said with a shrug, chewing on a lemon rind.

“Not helping!” Rowena shrieked angrily.

“It was business,” Cold said icily. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“And that’s why you let me take him out shopping? Let me think it was cool to hang out with him? Oh, because it’s just business?” Rowena snapped, completely fearless as she got right in her brother’s face. “What do you really want with Jimmy?”

“We have an arrangement,” was Cold’s calm reply, not moved by his sibling’s rage.

Rowena scoffed disgustedly, her eyes searching his face for some sort of clue.

“Mr. Poe and I are going to have a little chat about it right now,” Cold said, ignoring Jules’ loud chuckle and approaching Jimmy. He offered his hand and pulled him up on unsteady feet.

Jimmy wobbled, but his pulse fluttered at the contact. His stomach was beginning to bubble with nervous energy again. He had no idea what to expect from Cold now.

Glancing over his shoulder at his sister, Cold smirked. “Enjoy the rest of the party.”

“Roddy,” Rowena said sternly, “we’re not done talking about this.”

“Good night, Jules!” Cold called out, ignoring her and curling his arm possessively around Jimmy’s waist as they made to leave.

“Night night! Night, Twig!” Jules replied cheerfully, laughing as Rowena fell into an enraged bout of cursing that would make a sailor blush.

One of her shoes came flying by, clattering on the floor as she shouted after them, “Not done!”

“Good night, sweet sister!” Cold called back, leaving her shrieking in rage as he guided Jimmy toward a large staircase. He looked very pleased with himself and chuckled softly.

Jimmy still felt a little dizzy, but strikingly sober as Cold began to lead him upstairs. He tried to push the images of the blood out of his mind, focusing on the sound of his own labored breathing. Looking ahead, he struggled to pay attention to where Cold was taking him.

They were upstairs and walking into a massive foyer with a small seating area. It was filled with dozens of bags that Jimmy recognized as the loot from his shopping spree with Rowena.

Past the foyer was another den, but there were personal touches of the man who lived here. The furniture was more worn and comfortable, ratty old things that most people would have left out on a curb. There was a large record player with an impressive vinyl collection. A few posters and photographs were hung on the walls, but it was too dark for Jimmy to make much of anything out.

Deeper still they went, Jimmy now standing within the inner sanctum of Boss Cold’s master bedroom. The bed was a massive beast with four posts that reached the ceiling and plush blankets and pillows all perfectly arranged. The furniture in here was more ornate and warm, perhaps antique, though all the colors were still dark shades of blue and brown.

Jimmy fidgeted awkwardly, looking around anxiously as Cold turned on a small lamp at the bedside.

“How long have you known?” he asked before even thinking, the words spilling out like a glass of red wine on white carpet. He couldn’t take them back now, he had to know, he had to figure out the depth of the mess he had gotten himself into. “How long?”

Cold pursed his lips thoughtfully, but didn’t answer, nodding for Jimmy to sit down on a small chaise at the foot of the bed.

“Before or after we had sex?” Jimmy spat, plopping down on the chaise.

“Before,” Cold replied after a long pause.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Why didn’t you?” Cold shot back with all the maturity of a four-year-old and the indignant scowl to match.

“Hey, I tried! I tried telling you, but you wouldn’t let me!” Jimmy protested, crossing his arms over his chest. “Remember?”

Cold snorted, moving to a large liquor cabinet and opening it. Inside was a wet bar and a small ice machine. He wrapped a few cubes up in a small towel from the side of the sink, bringing it to Jimmy and pressing it against his swollen lip.

Jimmy winced, but held the ice in place. He didn’t know if he should be trying to run or begging on his knees. Cold didn’t appear to be angry with him, and it wouldn’t make much sense to drag him up to his personal bedroom if he was going to kill him.

Wordlessly moving back to the bar, Cold poured himself something dark out of an expensive-looking bottle.

Jimmy gulped, readjusting the ice on his mouth where it was starting to ache from the cold. He kept waiting for the gangster to speak, but no conversation seemed to be forthcoming. Several beats of silence passed before Jimmy couldn’t stand it any longer.

“So, was it before the second time? Before the first time?”

“Mr. Poe, for a moment, pretend that I’m not half as stupid as you seem to think I am,” Cold retorted dryly. “I already knew everything about you

before I ever stepped foot in your sorry little apartment."

Jimmy's heart dropped. "But why? I mean, I know I owed you a lot of money, but..." He was confused, his eyes narrowing at Cold suspiciously. "Why try to shake me down if you already knew Augustus was a cop?"

Cold chuckled over the rim of his glass. "Why indeed."

Realization punched Jimmy right in the gut. "This wasn't about me. This was about getting to him."

"That was the plan." Cold shrugged, not even having the decency to look like he felt guilty about it.

"What freakin' plan exactly?" Jimmy demanded, too angry to worry about pushing the gangster too far.

"I wanted to make a deal," Cold replied candidly. "Pile on your debt, give you a good scare, send you crying to Duplin. When he came banging on my door, I'd offer to erase your debt in exchange for him backing the fuck off." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "But then something happened."

"What?" Jimmy frowned softly.

"You," Cold answered simply, his eyes flickering over to settle on Jimmy's for a long moment. "When Jules threatened you, you didn't squeal for your little cop daddy to come save you. Oh, no. You offered yourself instead. Not what I was expecting, but with an offer like that... who could possibly refuse."

Jimmy felt sick and swallowed audibly. "What about Augustus?"

"Why do you think I had you meet me at a very public, very popular hotel," Cold drawled, "and then had you go right to the front desk to get a key? I did everything in order to ensure Duplin would find out that you were with me. If you wouldn't go to him, I'd make sure he came to me."

Jimmy's face felt hot, trying not to get upset. He couldn't believe how he had been played. "That's why you wouldn't let me tell you about my family last night," he realized, the pieces slowly beginning to fall into place. "You wanted to keep this stupid charade up."

“Correct,” Cold said with a small tilt of his head. “Mmm. I wasn’t expecting Lorre or Corman to recognize you tonight, though. A rare miscalculation on my part. I knew there was a chance Lorre might because of his history with Detective Duplin, but Corman surprised me.”

“But why? Why stop me from telling you about Augustus?” Jimmy snapped.

“Plausible deniability,” Cold said with a small shrug. “If you haven’t told me Duplin is your daddy, then you can’t upset our arrangement if I have to do something about him later. Killing a cop brings a lot of heat, but I’ll do what I have to.”

Jimmy dropped the ice and wrapped his arms tightly around himself, stunned speechless for a few moments. Killing Augustus; Cold was talking about killing him.

“Kill a cop,” Jimmy repeated quietly, stunned. “You’d kill him?”

“I’m not going back to prison, Mr. Poe,” Cold replied shortly.

“So, I’m what?” Jimmy demanded. “Your get out of jail free card?”

“Mmhm,” Cold hummed, walking to stand in front of Jimmy. He looked positively smug, saying, “All I have to do is wait, and Detective Duplin will come.”

“Well,” Jimmy huffed. “I don’t think your plan is going to work. Augustus already came to me trying to get to you, and I told him I didn’t want any fucking help from him.”

“What?” It was Cold’s turn to be surprised again.

“Yeah,” Jimmy scoffed in response. “He tracked me down over at Maury’s and was asking me about what I was doing with you.”

“And what did you tell him,” Cold asked him carefully, eyes never leaving his. His whole body had become rigid, every muscle tensing as he set his glass aside.

“What did I tell him?” Jimmy glared and swallowed back a sob as the memory of the encounter bathed him in frustration. “I told him to fuck off!

Maybe you should have done your research a little better because then you would know that I haven't talked to Augustus in years! Oh, but the fucking second he thinks he can use me to get to you—"

"Jimmy," Cold warned, bristling with rage.

"No! Fuck you!" Jimmy shot back, so furious with the interruption it didn't even register that Cold had actually used his first name. Tears were running down his face, and he angrily wiped them off with his sleeve. "He just wanted to use me, like you! Some stupid little pawn in your bullshit game! I'm just some *thing* you both want to use to fuck with each other! You don't care! And he even threatened me—"

"He threatened you," Cold repeated, his voice strangely calm suddenly. His body language shifted, still angry, but now it was focused elsewhere.

"Yeah, threatened to put the word out that I was a snitch, that I had been talking to the cops if I didn't agree to give him information." Jimmy sniffed, shaking his head. "He's such a bastard..."

Cold's face was blank, fingers tapping at the rim of his glass as he let Jimmy talk.

"You know the last time I called him was asking for money because I was hungry? I was desperate. He wouldn't do it unless I came home and gave up on my dad." Jimmy groaned in frustration, trying to stop crying, finally yelling, "You're both assholes! Fuck Augustus and fuck you!"

Jimmy couldn't breathe, and the room was beginning to spin again. He could suddenly see flashes of blood, unsure if it was his mother's or Corman's. His heart was pounding in his ears, so loud that everything else was drowned out by the terrible throbbing.

Not again. It was happening again. He was going to pass out.

Cold lunged forward as if to strike, his hand at the back of Jimmy's neck. But he didn't claw or squeeze, his hand was simply there, warm and comforting.

"Breathe," Cold commanded.

That voice, that dominant tone. It was like a beacon in the darkness, and Jimmy latched onto it tightly as he tried to drag himself out of the panic he'd fallen into.

Jimmy was trembling, his hands rising up to rest on Cold's hips. He could feel the man's tension beneath his fingers at being touched, but he wasn't being pushed away. Cold's grip at his neck invited Jimmy closer until he was standing.

"Just breathe," Cold commanded again, his voice stern, but his hands were gentle as they slid around to hold Jimmy's shoulders.

Jimmy gasped for air, tears streaming down his face as he fought to suck in precious oxygen. His heart was racing so fast now that it was making his stomach turn, and he desperately clung to the front of Cold's suit to hold himself steady.

"Easy now," Cold purred, his tone softer, tender as he coaxed him down off the edge of madness.

Sucking in one last shaking breath, Jimmy's body finally began to settle down. He still had his fingers tangled in Cold's jacket, but he didn't want to let go. "I'm sorry," he said weakly. "It hasn't... that hasn't happened in a long time."

"Was it the blood?" Cold asked quietly.

"Yes," Jimmy said, his eyes closing. "My mother, she was murdered..." He laughed half-heartedly. "Well, I guess you know all about that, too."

"Your father is currently serving in Westchester for the crime," Cold said flatly.

"Wrongly convicted," Jimmy said quickly, always fast to defend him.

"So says every man in prison," Cold tutted.

"My father really is innocent. I know he didn't kill my mother."

Cold quirked his brows, his icy eyes ticking over the features of Jimmy's face carefully. "You really do believe he's innocent. How can you be so sure?"

“Because I was there,” Jimmy whispered with a shudder. “I saw the whole thing. I saw another man, the man who killed her, a man wearing a white coat.”

“You were there,” Cold repeated. It almost sounded like a question.

“Yes,” Jimmy confirmed miserably, “but no one believed me. Not the cops, not even Augustus. That’s why we don’t talk anymore. He never believed what I saw.”

Cold seemed to be thinking about something, silent for a long moment. “I believe you, Jimmy.”

“You do?” No one had ever believed him except Maury.

“Yes, I do,” Cold replied softly. “I’ve been able to survive this long because of my wits and my instincts. I can tell when someone is lying to me. You are not.”

“Well, I appreciate that, actually a lot, but...” Jimmy hung his head defeatedly. “That doesn’t help get my dad out of prison. That’s how I got into so much debt, you know, trying to get his case reopened.”

“It’s impressive.”

“What? That I blew that much money with nothing to show for it?” Jimmy bit out sourly, Cold’s previous comment from the other evening still carrying a sting.

“Your loyalty,” Cold corrected, his eyes scanning over Jimmy’s face as his hands began to roam, slowly moving to loosely curl at the base of Jimmy’s neck. “Any man would be lucky to have that kind of devotion.”

Jimmy was not expecting that response, his hands coming up to rest on top of Cold’s. His eyes fluttered. “Is that... is that what you want from me?”

“What do you want, Mr. Poe?” Cold countered, his thumbs gently rubbing over Jimmy’s throat.

“You,” Jimmy replied immediately, melting into his touch. He guided Cold’s fingers to move around his throat just under his jaw, tenderly holding

his wrists. It was the same way they had held each other the first time they met in Jimmy's apartment.

There was something so intimate about this. Cold literally had Jimmy's life in his hands if he decided to be cruel, and Jimmy was totally submissive, offering himself over without question.

"I know you're just using me," Jimmy said softly, his voice cracking as he continued, "but... I don't want this to stop."

"Why?" Cold challenged.

"Because I'm using you, too," he replied earnestly. He had never felt as wanted or satisfied as he did being in this man's embrace. Nothing had ever soothed him like that beautiful voice, and he wasn't ready to lose it. "I like... the things we do."

Cold's fingers flexed ever so slightly, purring, "Mmm, arrangements like ours have to be built on trust, Mr. Poe."

"You don't trust me?" Jimmy frowned.

"No," Cold replied without hesitation.

"I trust you," Jimmy said all too quickly.

"You shouldn't," Cold said flatly. "I'm not a good man."

"I know."

"And yet you still want to continue our little arrangement?" Cold looked thoughtful, his lips pursing together and a little wrinkle etching his forehead.

"After some renegotiations, yes," Jimmy said stubbornly.

"Oh, really?" Cold scoffed, clearly amused. "And what makes you think I'm going to agree to do that?"

"You want this as much as I do," Jimmy replied, licking his lips nervously. He had to be right. This had to mean something. "We both know it's not about the money."

“What makes you so sure? How do you know I won’t get rid of you the second the last penny drops?”

“I don’t,” Jimmy replied with a shrug, “but... we’re still talking, aren’t we?”

Cold smirked, drawling slowly, “Fine, Mr. Poe. What are your demands?”

“Don’t kill Augustus,” Jimmy said, immediately cringing when he saw the instant look of disgust on Cold’s face. “He and I don’t get along, we probably never will, but please don’t hurt him.”

“Mmm, can’t promise you that,” Cold said with a scowl. “I’m running out of options for a peaceful resolution with Detective Duplin. I doubt you’re any good as leverage now.”

“W-why?”

“If I try to use you now, you may decide to end our little arrangement,” Cold said with a roll of his eyes. He hesitated, his expression turning uncharacteristically soft as he added quietly, “Our deal is important to me.”

“It is?” Jimmy tried not to sound so hopeful.

“You do owe me a lot of money.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy pouted, wishing Cold would admit there was more than money involved between them. “Half of which is from you charging me some bullshit penalty to screw with me!”

Cold did not look moved by the accusation but didn’t deny it, his eyebrow quirking again as he said, “And?”

Jimmy gritted his teeth, deciding to try a new angle. He smiled sweetly, laying it on thick as he said, “Come on. You’re Boss Cold. You rule over all of Strassen Springs, you’re like the most powerful gangster that’s ever lived... all those wits and instincts, right? You’re clever enough to find another way to get Augustus to leave you alone. Without involving me, or hurting anyone else.”

Cold’s lip curled into a faint snarl, clearly knowing that Jimmy was blatantly playing to his ego. It worked anyway. “Fine. I will find another way to deal with Detective Duplin... what else?”

“A job,” Jimmy said quickly.

“Oh?” Cold actually laughed. “Do you not enjoy your time working for me?”

“You said yourself you might drop me after I pay you off,” Jimmy said stubbornly. “I need a real job. Something I’ll be able to depend on. I have bills to pay, and I still want to help my father.”

Cold’s fingers began to move, deftly untying the bow around Jimmy’s neck. He dropped it to the floor, and began to slowly unbutton Jimmy’s shirt next. “I may be able to arrange something... is that all?”

“Don’t lie to me again,” Jimmy said desperately, trying not to get distracted by Cold’s nimble touch. “You’re right. For this arrangement to work, there has to be trust. I know... what you are. But what you did, using me like that, what you tried to do with Augustus... and Rowena, too? You lied to her—”

“Careful,” Cold warned, his amusement faltering in favor of an icy glare. “What I do for my sister is none of your concern.”

“Fine,” Jimmy protested, “but don’t lie to me again.” He swallowed thickly. “Please.”

“Very well,” Cold said, finished opening Jimmy’s shirt and gazing over him approvingly. “You should know as long as we’re reworking our deal, I have some revisions of my own.”

“And those are?”

“You may think of Rowena as your friend, but she’s my sister,” Cold said harshly. “I will do anything to keep her safe, and how I go about it is none of your business. Do not ever question how I treat her again. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Second, due to your mouthy performance today, I’m going to cut your nightly payments from ten down to five grand,” Cold went on, smiling cruelly.

“But now it will take twice as long to pay you back!” Jimmy protested, whining as Cold’s fingers began to loosen his belt.

“Mmm, maybe you should have thought about that before you spoke without permission at the party,” Cold chuckled darkly. “I’ll still allow you to earn bonuses at my discretion. So, perhaps you should focus more on pleasing me with that mouth instead of running it so much.”

Jimmy’s teeth clicked together before he argued any more. Cold had actually just ensured they had twice the amount of time together. He wasn’t really going to complain too much. “Anything else, sir?”

Cold visibly shivered at Jimmy addressing him so formally, smirking when his pants dropped down and he was indeed not wearing any underwear. He let his eyes glaze over with lust as he openly admired Jimmy, adding nonchalantly, “Oh, just one more thing.”

Jimmy’s cock twitched in anticipation, his tongue running over his battered lips eagerly. “Yes?”

“If Augustus Duplin or any of the SSPD approaches you again, you call me immediately,” Cold replied. “If I can’t use you, neither can they. Trust goes both ways, Mr. Poe.”

“Fine, but, there’s, uhm,” Jimmy stammered, embarrassed suddenly. “There’s sort of a problem, I can’t... it’s just that...”

“What?” Cold groaned, obviously eager to move on to more physical pleasures.

“I don’t have a phone,” Jimmy moaned helplessly.

Cold huffed, blinking several times in exasperation. “I will get you a fucking phone,” he growled, reaching down to start unbuttoning his own pants, palming his enormous erection through his underwear. “Now, do we have a deal?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy said, practically salivating at the sight of Cold’s cock straining to escape from the tight fabric.

“Good,” Cold purred happily, his fingers grabbing a handful of Jimmy’s hair as he hissed, “Now on your knees.”

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# Chapter Ten

As Jimmy sank down to his knees before Cold, he knew he had no reason to trust that the gangster would keep to their new deal. All he could do was hope that he wasn't wrong about the man's affection for him. In the same way he held out hope that his father would be free one day.

Here now before him, genuflecting with his mouth open to take whatever offering Cold would give him, Jimmy was instantly relieved of all his sorrows. Here he found peace. His anxiety was erased, and though the thrum of his blood pumping through his veins was excited, he was calm.

He was happy.

Jimmy had spent so many years alone, giving everything he had to finding a way to free his father. He had nearly starved, been evicted multiple times, and lost more jobs than he could count. One winter he had gotten so sick he thought he had pneumonia, but didn't dare go to the hospital because he knew he wouldn't be able to pay the bill.

He had cried himself to sleep infinite times, haunted by awful dreams of being a failure. His only friend was a crusty old loan shark, but even Maury's company was not enough to fill Jimmy's loneliness. His few romances were brief, always ending in heartache. His partners would always leave him, exhausted by his never-ending quest for justice.

At first they'd be supportive, a shoulder to cry on and offering a warm bed to sleep in. However, in their final moments together as the relationship was inevitably crumbling, they all confessed that they thought Jimmy was nuts. Not a one of his partners had ever truly believed him.

Except Cold.

Cold had looked into his eyes and told him he knew he was telling the truth. Jimmy hadn't had enough time to process the full gravity of how much that meant to him. It was completely and totally validating, a satisfaction he'd never known before.

If Cold could believe in him, well, Jimmy had to try to believe in Cold, too.

Cold slid his jacket off, and all of Jimmy's attention was immediately focused on his every move. Despite it only being his suit coat, Jimmy was mesmerized watching Cold undress. He'd dreamed of the day he would finally see what was underneath all those layers, and now his eyes took in every detail that he could.

The cut of Cold's vest revealed a much leaner form than Jimmy had first thought, though still much broader than his own. The shirt sleeves hugged muscular biceps and strong forearms. He watched Cold pull his thick cock out, giving himself soft strokes, and he was consumed with the need to taste him. He had forgotten about his wounded lip, his only thought on swiping his tongue across the head of Cold's cock where he saw the faint glimmer of pre-cum already forming.

Cold canted his hips forward, rubbing his cock against Jimmy's cheek, drawling, "So hungry for it, aren't you? Open your mouth wider."

Jimmy tried, he tried so hard, but the small laceration in his lip wouldn't allow it. He whimpered, trying to force it until he felt the fresh scab start to crack.

"Ah, ah," Cold warned, his thumb moving to gingerly glide over the wound.

"I can take it, sir," Jimmy pleaded, trying to turn his head and gobble up the tip of Cold's cock.

Cold seized Jimmy's hair back in a savage hold, growling, "You take what I give you, Mr. Poe. I think you need a refresher course in how this little arrangement of ours works."

With a whine, sullen and pouting, Jimmy ran his tongue over the scab on his lip. Cold's fingers dragging over his scalp sent bolts of pleasure all the way down his spine, making him gasp when he abruptly let go.

Cold tucked himself away, zipping up his pants, but he didn't buckle his belt. He pulled it from the loops, the leather making a delightful sound as it raced against the fabric on its way to freedom. Curling it up tight in his hands, Cold dropped down on the chaise behind Jimmy with a faint growl.

"Come here."

Jimmy whirled around, still bent on one knee as he watched Cold point at his thigh, beckoning him to lay over his lap. Jimmy started to shrug off his remaining clothes, his shirt and jacket still on, but Cold suddenly snapped the belt at his bare hip.

“Leave those on. Shoes, too.”

Jimmy nodded, immediately noticing that the bite of the belt was much sharper than Cold’s hand and lingered much longer. He moved to lay himself across Cold’s lap, blushing down to his neck at being so exposed.

Cold ran his hand over Jimmy’s lower back, sliding down to squeeze his cheeks and lewdly run a dry finger in between them. “Now, Mr. Poe... do you understand why you’re being punished?”

“I wasn’t listening?” Jimmy suggested, wiggling around as he tried to find a comfortable position. His legs were so long they dangled awkwardly onto the floor. He could keep his head up for now and glanced over his shoulder to peer up at Cold.

“Mmmm, that’s part of it,” Cold said. “I value obedience very much, but you’re already hurt and my intention is never to damage you. That’s much more important, don’t you think?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, hold very still for me.”

Jimmy froze, his breath getting stuck in his throat when he felt the cool leather of the belt teasing over his cheeks. He tried to relax, tried not to move, but the first crack of the belt made him jump and cry out.

Cold’s hand was right there, smoothing across the welt he’d left behind. “You did well. Four more, and maybe that’ll be enough for you to learn, hmmm?”

“God... yes. Yes, sir,” Jimmy panted.

“Good boy,” Cold praised, his hand moving away for the belt to snap against Jimmy’s flesh in its place.

Jimmy yelped, ending in a pitiful whine. It felt like Cold had somehow managed to hit the exact same spot as before, lightning up a scorching line of pain across his ass. His head felt too heavy to hold up now.

The third pop made Jimmy moan, the burning sensation sending all sorts of mixed signals between his legs. His cock was aching, grinding into Cold's thigh, trying to find some relief from the intense sensation.

Cold reverently petted Jimmy's welted cheeks, dipping his finger in his mouth before sliding it teasingly over his hole. "Just two more, Mr. Poe."

The fourth strike made Jimmy cry out again, sweat starting to erupt all along his back and face. It was too much, too hot, and he groaned as his head fell down in utter submission. The pain buzzed all over, his head light but happy, as he mewled softly at Cold's finger slipping inside of him again.

"You have the most perfect little asshole," Cold said, spitting on his fingers before returning to play with the edge of his hole. "And it's all mine."

"Yours," Jimmy agreed softly.

"For the duration of this arrangement, no one else will have you," Cold said, a possessive growl rasping his usually smooth voice. "Do you understand me, Mr. Poe?"

Jimmy hesitated, blinking stupidly as he struggled to lift his head and stare at Cold. He couldn't be sure, but it sounded like Cold was saying they were going to be exclusive. "And you'll be mine?"

Cold sneered, a single finger pushing inside him deep enough to make Jimmy whimper. "I'm not the one who offered up their body for money, Mr. Poe. You did. Until the debt is paid, every inch of you belongs to me. I, however, am a free man, and I will do as I please."

Needy and upset, Jimmy whined a deeper complaint. It wasn't that he desired to be with anyone else; it was quite the opposite. He didn't want anyone but Cold, and the mere thought of him being with another person stabbed Jimmy right in the chest with a wicked prick of envy that threatened to poison his good mood.

“That’s not fair,” Jimmy protested, yelping loudly when Cold cracked the belt over his stinging ass once more. “F-fuck,” he stuttered, tears welling up as he went limp on Cold’s lap, the only tension left in his body curling his hands into tight fists.

“Our arrangement is more than fair. Any whore would consider themselves lucky to be paid like you are,” Cold scoffed.

“Yes, sir.” Jimmy uttered the words as if they were a curse. There was something about that word that invoked a deep sense of shame and anger, but it also made his loins ache.

“Mmmm, that’s a good boy,” Cold purred.

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy seethed again, his cock grinding into Cold’s leg, hating how good it felt.

Cold’s hands glided over his stinging ass, eliciting a soft moan. “Take off your clothes now, shoes as well,” he ordered abruptly. “Get up on the bed.”

Jimmy expected him to shove him off his lap onto the floor, but Cold helped him and guided him onto the mattress, even divesting him of the clothes himself when Jimmy’s hands shook in an effort to obey. Cold picked everything up and neatly folded them to join his jacket on the chaise.

Sighing contently, Cold’s eyes hungrily roved over Jimmy’s body. Jimmy blushed from the intense gaze, his cock bobbing between his legs as he stretched out across the bed before Cold.

“Hands and knees now, scoot toward me just until you’re about to fall off the bed,” Cold instructed, purring pleasurably as Jimmy quickly complied. He traced his fingers across the welt marks he’d left on Jimmy’s cheeks, proudly touching each one individually.

Keeping his ass up, Jimmy bowed his head down and tried to contain his emotions. Today was too much, too fast, and he focused on Cold’s voice to keep him from sinking back down into the abyss.

Cold did care for him, he was certain, and he had about two months now to prove it.

Jimmy heard Cold tinkering around in a drawer, a lid snapping open and the distinct squirt of something wet. He gasped when he felt Cold's fingers sliding around his cock, praying for more friction but receiving very little.

"Hold still," Cold warned, his dexterous fingers winding something around the base of Jimmy's cock and starting to slip behind his balls.

Jimmy resisted the urge to wiggle at the new sensation, ducking his head down to peer between his legs at what Cold was doing. It was a thin leather band, making him twitch when he heard a distinct click of a button snapping and felt immediate pressure around his genitals. A cock ring. Cold was putting a cock ring on him.

The rest of the snaps clicked into place, Cold's fingers sliding around to test the fit. "Nice and snug..." He paused before asking, "Not too tight?"

"No, sir." Jimmy was confused. He had used a cock ring before when he was feeling super daring with an ex-girlfriend from college. It was one that had a little vibrating bit on it. But he only wore it around his cock, certainly not his balls, too. He was also completely mystified as to why he was wearing it when Cold was clearly intent on being the one fucking him.

Cold seemed to sense Jimmy's apprehension and explained. "This will keep you nice and hard, but you won't come. You're not going to come until I think you've earned it."

Swallowing audibly, Jimmy nodded. His cock was beyond hard at that moment, and he was surprised at how quickly all the blood began pooling there. He was certain he could etch glass with the tip of his dick. His balls felt tighter, too, and he groaned as Cold's hand palmed them gently.

"But when you do, it will be very, very intense," Cold assured him, his hand moving to grab more lubricant judging by the familiar squelching sound.

Jimmy expected Cold's cock to start filling him up, but instead he felt the cool sensation of silicone probing his hole. A dildo, not as thick as Cold's cock, was still enough to make him gasp as it started pushing inside him.

As Cold carefully thrust the toy in and out, he squeezed Jimmy's stinging cheek, going deeper with the dildo each time. "Look at how beautifully you're opening up. You're taking it so well."

Gasping faster and faster as Cold fucked him, Jimmy arched his back into the sensation. The toy wasn't as thick as Cold's cock, but it was definitely longer, making him groan as his body worked to adjust to the additional length. Cold's soothing praise was a warm blanket wrapping him up tight, comforting and momentarily distracting him from his own throbbing erection.

Cold kept moving the toy, and reached down to stroke his fingers along the shaft of Jimmy's member, purring delightfully, "Why, Mr. Poe, you are positively dripping."

Jimmy whimpered, embarrassed at how slick he was as Cold's fingers teased at his cock. He was so wet, and Cold stroking him with feather-light touches made him want to scream for release.

"Please," Jimmy implored, trying to rock his hips down into Cold's hand and gasping when the toy was thrust a little harder.

"Please, what?" Cold asked expectantly.

"Please... I need... I need more, sir," Jimmy cried, fingers tugging at the blankets beneath him.

Cold squeezed Jimmy's hip affectionately, slowly withdrawing the toy and testing his hole with his fingers. "Mmm, are you ready for me?"

"Yes, sir," Jimmy replied eagerly, shifting his knees and spreading his legs invitingly.

Quickly rolling on a condom and grabbing more lube, Cold positioned the head of his cock at Jimmy's hole. He rested his hands on Jimmy's hips and slowly pushed forward.

Jimmy groaned, the sound stuttering in his throat as his body stretched to take on Cold's impressive girth. He was preparing himself for Cold to start fucking him, waiting for the brutal slams to get going as they always had before, but it didn't happen.

Instead, Cold's hands rubbed Jimmy's raw cheeks, his cock sliding in and out with purpose, but patiently.

Moaning wantonly, Jimmy was left gasping with each thrust. He felt so full, and Cold kept grazing his prostate, just enough to make him squirm and make his cock shiver. The ring wasn't uncomfortable, not yet, but his balls felt tight, and his cock was insanely sensitive.

Sex had always been good with Cold, but this was incredible. He was moving so tenderly, squeezing Jimmy's hips and guiding him back to make the most of every thrust. Jimmy crumbled into the mattress, moaning desperately as Cold sweetly wrecked him.

Cold's hands were all over him, caressing his sides, grabbing onto his shoulders as he rocked their bodies together. Mouth hanging open in a blissful smile, Jimmy tipped his head back. This was heaven.

But the tension in his balls was becoming uncomfortable, the pressure nearing overwhelming. He felt frantic, unsure what to do. He didn't want to use the safe word because it did feel good, but fuck, it was almost too much.

"Sir, I need to... I need to come."

"Yes. You've been such a very good boy for me," Cold growled, his voice rough with lust. He never stopped moving his hips, skilled fingers quickly unsnapping the ring and grabbing Jimmy's cock.

Jimmy shouted, every nerve instantly on fire and crying out as Cold stroked him. He was too sensitive and writhed in protest. He could feel all the blood rushing back between his legs, and two, maybe three quick jerks of Cold's hand was all it took and he was coming. It was like being tipped over a waterfall, his stomach dropping as his cock pulsed repeatedly.

"Oh, God, ohhhh, fuck, fuck, fuck!" Jimmy wailed, every muscle in his body twitching with pleasure as he came. He heard Cold grunt as his ass clenched down on his cock, fucking him through it until Jimmy swore his bones had all been replaced with spaghetti.

Jimmy's cock was still tingling when Cold pulled out, one last moan making his lower lip tremble. He wanted to plop face first into the mattress, utterly exhausted, but Cold hadn't finished yet.

"Turn around," Cold grunted urgently.

Jimmy tried to move as best as he could, his body aching as he shifted positions. Cold had taken off the condom and his cock was right there in Jimmy's face, his hand frantically jacking himself off and aiming right at Jimmy's mouth.

"Yes?" Cold asked, his ministrations slowing until Jimmy replied.

"Fuck, yes," Jimmy panted, sticking out his tongue to welcome the load.

Cold's lips twitched up in a smile, grunting, "Good boy."

He kept stroking his cock, groaning low as he came a few moments later, hot cum splattering across Jimmy's tongue that he lapped up, swallowing every drop eagerly and savoring the warmth and taste. There was one errant shot that had grazed his cheek, and he tried to stick out his tongue to get it.

Cold tenderly wiped it off his face, offering it to Jimmy. "A very, very good boy," he confirmed, practically purring like a house cat when Jimmy greedily licked the cum off his fingers.

Jimmy beamed proudly, murmuring contently when Cold gently touched his face. "I was good?"

"Very good," Cold sighed, his hand softly curling around Jimmy's neck and thumb stroking along his jaw.

Leaning into Cold's grip, Jimmy's fingers rose up to hold his wrist. His stomach was fluttering from the praise, and he gently petting the underside of Cold's pulse point. Cold hadn't flinched away yet. Jimmy wanted to hold onto this tender connection for as long as he could.

"Now. Let's get you cleaned up," Cold said with a smirk, ending it all too soon, pulling away and adjusting himself. He straightened his vest and offered a hand to help Jimmy up to his feet.

Jimmy's muscles were the consistency of Jell-O, and he was very grateful to have Cold assist him. He loved how Cold's hand felt in his and dared to give it a small squeeze. He wanted to tell Cold to go get a bowl to carry him in because he was about to melt from all the attention. Cold's arm felt so strong around him as he guided him into the bathroom.

It was the size of Jimmy's apartment, all black tile and stainless steel. There was a monstrous tub and a standup shower that a small group of people could have fit in.

The only light came from a series of small bulbs lining the edges of the mirrors hanging over the dual vanity sink. Jimmy was grateful for the calming atmosphere as Cold got him into the shower.

"Get washed up and come to bed," Cold instructed softly, leaving him then to bathe by himself.

Jimmy groaned happily as the hot water poured over him, leaning against the cool tile. He winced as he washed his body, his cheeks still a bit tender, but he lingered for a long while, singing to himself as he enjoyed the steam billowing up around him.

Jimmy lost track of the time, singing through at least three or four songs. He finally gave up the hot water, sticking his head out to find a thick black robe and a few towels waiting for him by the sink. Blushing softly, he realized Cold had probably heard him singing.

He quickly dried off and wrapped himself up in the plush robe to scurry back into the bedroom. He could hear music playing softly from the other room, and curiosity made him pause. Jimmy wanted to see what Cold was doing, but he'd been told to go to bed.

Didn't mean he couldn't sneak a peek on his way to bed, right?

Tiptoeing over to peer through the open doorway, Jimmy spied Cold sitting in a worn recliner. The music was coming from his record player, a warm and soothing jazz tune. Jimmy didn't recognize the singer, but she had a beautiful voice.

Cold didn't strike him as a jazz kind of guy, but it was a pleasant surprise. Jimmy knew so little about Cold other than his nasty reputation and what Rowena had told him. Cold was clearly not someone who was easy to get close to, but Jimmy was stubborn. He wanted to know everything about him, good and bad, and everything in between.

Jimmy quickly hurried back to bed before Cold noticed him spying, diving right into the middle of the mattress. He spread himself out, wiggling

around and working his body under the covers. Making a small nest out of the pillows, he yawned as he tried to drift off to sleep.

Even though his body was drained, his mind was wide awake and aflutter with a constant train of thought he couldn't derail. He tried listening to Cold's music to distract himself, but Cold only played a few more songs before turning it off.

Jimmy heard him come back into the bedroom and turn off all the lights before heading to the bathroom and locking the door. Cold showered briefly and returned to bed, smelling of fresh soap and shampoo.

Despite being still awake, Jimmy was too tired to acknowledge Cold's presence. His heart did a few somersaults though feeling Cold slowly scoot up right beside him. Their bodies didn't make contact, but Cold was close, so close that Jimmy could feel his warm breath tickling his face.

Could Cold tell he wasn't asleep? It was dark, so perhaps he wasn't sure. Jimmy didn't want to disturb the moment, waiting to see what Cold would do. He remained as still as he could, his eyes closed tight.

Cold made a small sound, almost a laugh, and his lips tenderly pressed to Jimmy's cheek. It was a gentle kiss, sweet and warm, and lingered for a moment. Jimmy couldn't help but let a small murmur escape at the unexpected affection, overcome with bliss. He tried to remain calm, not wanting to give himself away.

Cold had kissed him. He had freaking kissed him. Sure, it was only his cheek, and it was probably because he thought Jimmy was asleep—

"Good night, Mr. Poe," Cold said softly, ever so smug. Jimmy could hear him smirking. He knew.

"Uhhh... good night," Jimmy stammered. His cheeks were hot, his heart hammering excitedly in his chest.

"Get some sleep," he said, chuckling lightly as he rolled over away from Jimmy to get settled. "You've more than earned it."

Jimmy was beaming, grinning like an absolute fool. Cold did care about him. It wasn't the arrangement he was so concerned with, it was Jimmy that

he wanted to hold onto. After all, why else cut his nightly payments except to extend their time together? Why take such good care of him? Why freaking kiss him?

Jimmy didn't know how long it took him to finally doze off after that, but he dreamed of warm snuggles and a hand resting on his arm. When he woke up, groggy and confused, there was indeed something warm next to him.

It was Cold.

At some point in the night, Jimmy had cuddled right up to him. Their legs were tangled together and Jimmy's arm was thrown over Cold's chest, fingers curled in the fabric of his pajamas. Cold was stretched out on his back, hand lightly resting on Jimmy's forearm. Cold had made no effort to move him, letting him snuggle all he wanted.

Jimmy smiled, nuzzling his cheek against Cold's shoulder and falling right back asleep. When he woke up again, Cold was gone and sunlight peeked in through the heavy curtain. Jimmy flailed around for a few more minutes, yawning as he finally made himself sit up. There was no sign of Cold, but there was a small box and a note sitting on the bedside table.

He picked up the note first, smiling when he saw Cold's familiar handwriting.

*You start your new job today. Rowena will drive you.*

*Be at work by 12:00. Do not be late.*

*Be back here tonight at midnight.*

*-RL*

Jimmy grinned, popping open the box and finding inside a brand new smartphone. It had a shiny red case, and there was a sticky note with the password stuck on the back. He fiddled with the phone, seeing there was already one entry listed under the contacts section.

It didn't have a name, only a snowflake emoji. Cute.

He already knew the first person he was going to call.

"Martine's Pawn, whadya fuckin' want?" a gruff voice demanded.

“Maury! It’s me! Jimmy!” he exclaimed excitedly.

“Jimmy! Hey! How the fuck are ya?” Maury’s tone instantly softened. “Where ya been? Stopped by your place last night, ya wasn’t there.”

“Oh, Maury,” Jimmy sighed, chuckling as he raked a hand through his hair. “You are never going to believe where I am right now.”

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# Chapter Eleven

“Why wouldn’t I fuckin’ believe you? You ain’t never lied to me, kid,” Maury said, his voice sounding incredibly distressed. “Come on.”

“No! I just mean, it’s so crazy,” Jimmy laughed. “I’m at Cold’s ridiculous freakin’ mansion. I think he likes me? Like, *like* likes me? I mean, he broke someone’s nose for touching me, which is super sick, but I guess he meant it, well, in a nice gangster way—”

“Huh?” Maury was stunned.

“Oh! Right! So, apparently Cold was just using me to try and get to Augustus because of this whole Dickie White thing, but we made a new deal! It’s okay! And God, I had a crazy panic attack for the first time in years—”

“Jimmy, motherfucker, slow the hell down!” Maury pleaded. “For fuck’s sake, kid. Take a breath.”

Jimmy did as instructed, grinning from ear to ear. “Oh, Maury,” he gushed, a swarm of rapid butterflies invading his entire digestive system. “I think I’m starting to fall—”

“Fuck, don’t you say it, don’t you fuckin’ say it!” Maury wailed. “Fuck! Kid! Dick and heart, remember? You’re gettin’ them all mixed up!”

“But my heart’s bigger than my dick!” Jimmy protested, frowning when he realized how terrible that sounded. “I meant... uhm.”

“I wouldn’t go around advertisin’ that, kid.”

“It came out wrong!”

“Ya think?” Maury snorted, then groaned irritably. “Get your ass down here so I can talk some fuckin’ sense into you. I still got—”

“Still got the crowbar, I know,” Jimmy finished for him, very familiar with this threat. “Look, I know it’s totally nuts, and maybe I am nuts, but—”

“James motherfuckin’ David Poe, I swear to fuckin’ Christ—”

“He believes me, Maury,” Jimmy said quietly. He didn’t need to raise his voice. He knew that Maury would understand exactly what he meant and the weight that such a thing carried.

“Well, fuck, kid,” Maury sighed. “Look, we’ll talks about it, okay? Come on down to the shop.”

“Ohh, Jimmy!” the familiar voice of Rowena Legrand sang out, knuckles wrapping at the door. “Are you decent?”

“I’ll try,” Jimmy said quickly to Maury, then called out, “Yup! One sec!” He turned his attention back to the phone, saying, “I’ll try to come by soon, okay?”

“I love you, ya fuckin’ idiot.”

“Love you, too,” Jimmy said with a smile, waving at Rowena as she came sauntering in.

“Awww, who was that?” Rowena pouted dramatically. “Not anybody I gotta worry about, I hope.”

Jimmy shook his head, laughing, “God, no. It was my friend, Maury Martine.”

“Maury the Mouth?”

“Yeah. We’re close. He’s kinda like a dad to me. It’s, well, it’s a long story.”

Rowena came over and bounced on the edge of the bed. “Oh, I love long stories!”

Jimmy glanced at his phone. It was already after ten o’clock. He was surprised he had slept so late. He smirked at Rowena, teasing, “I think I’m supposed to be getting ready for work soon?”

Rowena waved her hand. “Pffft! Whatever.”

Jimmy frowned, saying, “Cold said not to be late...”

“Uh, he got you a job working for me,” Rowena said with a dramatic roll of her eyes and glancing at her nails. “We’ll show up whenever the hell we want.”

“For you?” Jimmy was surprised.

“At my club,” Rowena said proudly, pausing to reconsider. “Well, it’s really Roddy’s club, but he lets me run it. La Belle downtown? Ever hear of it?”

“Wow, yeah!” Jimmy had certainly heard of it. It was a popular piano bar housed in a renovated theater. He had seen the marquis lights all his life, and he was excited to know he would be working at a place he had always admired. “Wait, what am I gonna be doing exactly?”

Rowena shrugged, asking flatly, “I dunno. What are you good at?”

Jimmy made a face, mentally reviewing his random resume of the many careers he’d had over the years. He sighed, admitting mournfully, “Losing jobs.”

“Okay. We’ll find something nice and easy for you,” Rowena giggled, patting his feet playfully. “Now, come on! Get some damn clothes on! We’ll grab breakfast, and you can tell me how a sweet little thing like you got tangled up with Maury the fuckin’ Mouth!”

Jimmy grinned, waiting for Rowena to go downstairs so he could poke through his purchases to find something to wear. He had no idea what kind of work Rowena was going to choose for him, opting for an outfit that was somewhere in between dressy and casual. Jeans, vintage sneakers, t-shirt, with a red plaid button-up.

He fixed his hair, mourning the absence of his toothbrush but managed to find some mouthwash. Grabbing his wallet and keys, he nearly forgot his new phone before he hurried downstairs to find Rowena.

Jimmy nearly got lost trying to figure out where she was, finding her in a beautiful kitchen appointed with stainless steel appliances and marble countertops. She sat at a center island outfitted with a stovetop where a very tall and spindly man was scrambling eggs. There was a large pitcher filled with something slushy and orange, and Rowena was already pouring two drinks.

“Awww, look at you, pretty!” Rowena teased, whistling and offering one of the drinks toward him.

“Thanks! Eh, isn’t it a little early?” Jimmy laughed, realizing that there was definitely a lot of alcohol in the mix.

“Nah,” Rowena argued. “They’re mimosas! They have vitamin C, it’s good for you. Jimmy, meet Jerry.” She gestured to the tall gentleman.

Jimmy recognized him as their limo driver from yesterday. “Good morning!” He waved with a little smile.

“*Bonjour*,” Jerry greeted in a deep, rough French accent, smiling politely as he began to plate the eggs.

Rowena patted the seat next to her for Jimmy to join her.

“So, are you serious about maybe not exactly being at the club by noon?” Jimmy asked, sipping at his drink.

“Mmm, why?” Rowena asked playfully.

“Would it be okay if we made a few stops then?”

“Like what?”

“Well, I guess I need to get all those clothes back to my place, right? And Maury wants to see me—”

“Give me your keys,” Rowena said abruptly, wiggling her fingers at him.

Jimmy frowned, but reached into his pocket and offered out his keyring.

Rowena took it and smiled sweetly at Jerry. “Hey, Jerry? Could you be a dear and get somebody to take Jimmy’s stuff back to his place? Maybe wash it, hang it up and stuff, too?”

“Of course, *Mademoiselle* Legrand,” Jerry said, nodding as he accepted the keys and tucked them in his pocket.

“Holy crap,” Jimmy exclaimed, blushing wildly. “You guys really don’t have to do all that!”

“Jimmy, your apartment is really depressing,” Rowena sighed dramatically. “I don’t wanna go back there, I’ll be honest. Unless it’s to burn all your old clothes. Then maybe.”

“It is no problem, *monsieur*,” Jerry assured him, smiling warmly as he offered them each a plate of eggs and fresh fruit. “You’re the Legrands’ guest, it’s our pleasure.”

“Jerry, baby, you’re amazing,” Rowena gushed, blowing him bunches of kisses and eagerly digging in. In between bites, her eyes danced over to Jimmy. “Mmm, where else did you want to go?”

“Mostly just to see Maury,” Jimmy said, moaning happily as he ate. They were the most amazing eggs he had ever tasted. Jerry was indeed incredible.

“How did you meet Maury?” Rowena asked curiously, her brows quirking up. “Come on. It’s story time.”

“It’s all because of the phone company,” Jimmy explained, smiling fondly. “See, it started when my mom used to work in the jewelry store next to the pawn shop. She worked there a few days a week, you know, cleaning jewelry and doing repairs. The phone in the store kept going out, like all the time! The phone company kept fixing it, and it would still go out, like at least once a week.”

Jimmy knew his face was lit up like a Christmas tree, always happy to share memories of his mom.

“So she kept going over to Maury’s to use the phone to call home. Don’t let him fool you, he’s a sucker for a damsel in distress. He let her come over to call home and soon, they became friends. Maury always told her dirty jokes, loved to make her blush, and then she introduced my dad. He’s a doctor and he’s been taking care of Maury’s kids since before I was even born.”

Rowena seemed completely enraptured by the story.

“Maury has three sons, and the two youngest were always getting sick,” Jimmy went on. “Especially Junior, he had really bad asthma. They couldn’t afford to go see a doctor or any of the medication, so my dad would sneak it over to the shop with my mom. Said it was payment for letting her use the phone.”

Then the lightness Jimmy had been feeling dwindled.

“It’s just... the day she died,” he said absently, his mind starting to wander, “the phone...” He thought of Cold’s voice, purring seductively in his ear, to snap himself out of the bad memories. “Anyway! Sorry. So, yeah. When I finally turned eighteen and got away from you know who, Maury was the first person I ran to.”

“You mean Detective Duplin,” Rowena said with a thoughtful bite of egg.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said sullenly. “He... well, I guess you know now. We haven’t talked in a very long time.”

“Come on, sweetie,” Rowena soothed, patting Jimmy’s arm gently. “You can give me all the dirty details on the way.” She guzzled her drink, picking up the pitcher and her giant purse from the floor with a grin. “Jerry, we are ready!”

Jimmy struggled to finish his last few bites of eggs with Rowena already dragging him toward the front door. On the way to the pawn shop, he spilled his guts, told Rowena about all the fights, about Augustus trying to keep him from seeing his father, and his staunch refusal to believe that David might actually be innocent.

“And you saw it?” Rowena said quietly when Jimmy had finished, still a few blocks from their destination.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said with a sad smile.

“And Augustus thinks, what? You imagined it?” Rowena looked angry for a second, visibly trying to calm herself down. She was clearly not a big fan of Augustus, and this only solidified her already unfavorable opinion.

“I guess,” Jimmy replied. “He would never say why he was so convinced, he just said he knew my dad did it. He kept saying that there was never anyone else there. But I know I saw the Man in White. I saw what he did.”

Emptying the last of the pitcher into her glass and sucking down a big gulp, Rowena quirked her eyebrow at the name.

“He was wearing a white coat,” Jimmy explained. “That’s all I can remember now. I think maybe I used to be able to see his face? But not anymore. I guess it’s been too long.”

“I’m really sorry,” Rowena said, reaching out to gingerly touch Jimmy’s knee. “Augustus Duplin is a fuckin’ dick.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy mused quietly. “I think he thought he was helping? I just wish he believed me. Maury is the only one who does.” He couldn’t help but smile now, his cheeks warming up. “Well, and your brother.”

Rowena grinned at that, teasing, “Oh, I bet he does! And hey, I believe you, too.” She squeezed Jimmy’s knee, saying, “I hope you know I still want to be friends.”

“You’re not mad about the whole ‘my adopted dad is a cop trying to arrest your brother’ thing?” Jimmy asked dubiously.

“Why would I be? It’s not your fault he’s a prick,” Rowena snorted. “I mean, I wish you had said something, but—”

“I tried telling your brother!” Jimmy pouted.

“Hey, hey,” Rowena soothed, taking another sip of her drink and shaking her head. “It’s okay. We all have dirty little secrets, Jimmy. Me, you, Roddy, even that bastard Augustus Duplin.”

It was hard to imagine Augustus with any dirty secrets, but Jimmy nodded all the same. He smiled as the limo pulled up in front of the pawn shop, exclaiming, “Hey! We’re here!”

Rowena exited the limo gracefully with Jerry’s assistance. She still moved effortlessly despite having downed an entire pitcher of mimosas nearly by herself, heels clicking against the sidewalk as she approached the door of the shop.

Jimmy followed, opening the door for her and hurrying inside. “Hey, Maury! It’s me! I got somebody—”

“You fuckin’ dumbass! I shoulda never told you none of that fuckin’ shit!” Maury was raging from somewhere in the back. “I told you, I fuckin’ told yous not to get all mixed up, and what d’ya do? You go and try to fall in love with a fuckin’ gangster!”

“Maury!” Jimmy protested, blushing immediately.

Rowena grinned savagely as she leaned across the counter, not saying a word, clearly pleased that she was privy to this conversation.

“And not just any gangster, but fuckin’ Boss Cold! Fuckin’ Roderick Legrand! Come on, kid. This was about you gettin’ your shit handled and not endin’ up in a damn coffin!” Maury continued to shout, starting to shuffle toward the counter. “You fuckin’ stupid, scrawny...”

Maury finally appeared, trailing off when he saw that Jimmy wasn’t alone.

“You must be Maury the Mouth,” Rowena greeted cheerfully. “A living legend, here in the flesh.”

“You’re Rowena fuckin’ Legrand,” Maury said, gawking stupidly. He took off his hat, smoothing his hair back and actually smiling like a shy little boy. “Ma’am, can I just say your mugshots don’t do no fuckin’ favors, ‘cause you are a stone cold fox.”

Rowena giggled, completely charmed. “Aren’t you just a doll,” she cooed, reaching out and stroking her hand across Maury’s cheek.

Maury blushed.

Maury the Mouth was blushing and stammered, trying to reply, “Eh, wow, yeah.”

Amazed at the ridiculous sight of seeing his friend so clearly smitten, Jimmy grinned.

“Maurice Martine,” Maury said, eagerly taking Rowena’s hand and pressing a gentle kiss upon it. “An absolute pleasure.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” she said, chuckling lightly. “Mmm, now, what was that you were saying about Jimmy falling in love with a gangster? And how stupid that was?”

“Sorry, Miss Legrand,” Maury replied, not pulling any punches, “your brother is a ruthless prick, and I’m sure you understand my concerns with young Jimmy here gettin’ mixed up with him beyond the terms of their, eh, their arrangement.”

“Oh, indeed he is,” Rowena laughed, surprising Jimmy with how well she took Maury insulting Cold. “But I can tell you that he is very sweet on Jimmy. I think they’re going to be just fine together.”

“And I tells you that I still ain’t too old to bust some kneecaps with a crowbar,” Maury threw back, grinning. “You tell that brother of yours I don’t care who he is. It’s one thing to fuck Jimmy, but he better not break his fuckin’ heart. Everybody’s bones crack if ya bash ‘em hard enough.”

“Oooo, is that a threat?” Rowena giggled.

“A promise, ma’am,” Maury replied cordially, tipping his hat.

“I like him,” Rowena said with a big smile, nudging Jimmy playfully.

Jimmy was dazed by this collision of worlds before him but laughed with them both. Maury’s concern was sweet, as was Rowena’s continued insistence that Cold cared for him. Her personality was so warm and lovely, even Maury couldn’t resist her. Listening to them chat, his mind started to wander.

He thought about what Maury had said; about Cold breaking his heart.

No, that wasn’t going to happen. Cold did care about him, even if he didn’t say it. Rowena was convinced of it, and Jimmy had definitely not forgotten that sweet kiss from last night. He had to believe there was going to be a happy ending.

“So this is where everything in your apartment ended up?” Rowena asked with a wink.

“Oh, yeah,” Jimmy answered, coming back to the conversation. “That’s my TV over there. My microwave, my DVDs, my DVD player, ehhhh. Pretty much hocked everything I had.” He laughed sadly, adding, “All of my mom’s jewelry.”

“You pawned your mother’s jewelry?” Rowena asked with a little frown.

“Yeah,” Jimmy nodded miserably. “Needed to eat.”

“Hey, now,” Maury protested. “I held onto it all. And I swears I woulda never sold anything of Eliza’s. Was just hangin’ on to it until Jimmy got

back on his feet. I ain’t even charging interest!”

Jimmy smiled softly. “I know. And one day, I’ll get it all back.”

“How much is it in hock for?” Rowena asked.

“Fifteen big,” Maury replied, his bushy brows furrowing together.

“Hmmm,” Rowena hummed, digging around in her purse and batting her eyes seductively. “How about ten in cash, right now?”

“Rowena,” Jimmy protested. He couldn’t believe anyone carried around that much money, equally amazed at Rowena’s endless generosity. “I can’t let you do that, please. That’s, that’s really nice of you—”

“Jimmy Poe,” she said coolly. “I do what I want.” Her eyes flicked to Maury with a pretty smile. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Maury said with his own toothy grin. He happily accepted a thick stack of cash, thumbing through it and counting it with quick fingers.

Jimmy stared incredulously at Rowena’s large and seemingly magical purse, wondering what else she kept in there. She could pull out a toaster oven or a bazooka and he wouldn’t be surprised.

“I’ll be right back,” Maury said, taking the cash with him and disappearing into the back of the store.

“Thank you,” Jimmy said, beaming gratefully at Rowena. “I’ll find a way to pay you back. Really.”

“Keep making my brother happy,” Rowena said with a warm smile, “and we’ll call it even.”

“I... I’ll try.” Jimmy blushed.

Maury returned, setting a small jewelry box on the counter. It was round, white porcelain with red roses painted on the lid. “Go on,” he urged, smiling softly. “It’s all yours, kid.”

Sliding his hands around the jewelry box, Jimmy eagerly accepted it. He could remember it sitting on top of his mother’s dresser, watching her dip into it to get ready to go off to work or sometimes dressing up for date night

with his dad. His memories of her were fading as the years went by, no matter how much he tried to cling to every last one. This little jewelry box was treasure, not just for what it held, but the memories it carried.

Smiling at Rowena, Jimmy's eyes felt wet. "Thank you. Really."

Rowena kissed his cheek with a loud smooching sound. "Awww, come on. Don't get all mushy on me. Better make sure it's all there." She cast a teasing glare at Maury. "Can't trust people nowadays."

Maury rolled his eyes, and Jimmy laughed as he lifted up the lid. There was a string of pearls, his parents' wedding rings, and an assortment of costume jewelry. He picked up every piece, admiring each one.

Rowena looked skeptical. Other than the pearls and perhaps the diamond engagement ring, there didn't appear to be very much of value. "You seriously let Jimmy pawn all of this for fifteen grand?"

"Hey, that one ring in there is worth twice that," Maury scoffed. "I ain't gonna do Jimmy like that."

Jimmy frowned. "What ring?"

Maury poked in the jewelry box, picking up a tarnished gold ring with a large red gemstone. It was a man's ring, thick and intricately detailed. There was dirt and grime crusted all in the detailed carvings, and Jimmy couldn't quite make out what they were.

"That is a two-carat ruby," Maury said with a laugh. "Thirty large, easy."

Jimmy didn't remember this particular ring. Maybe it had belonged to a grandfather or a great uncle. He passed it over to Rowena for inspection.

"Oh! It's engraved," Rowena purred excitedly, her eyes narrowing as she tried to make it out. "Looks like initials. RL. Ooo, for Rowena Legrand!" She giggled, handing the ring back over to Jimmy.

He laughed and put the ring back in the jewelry box. Glancing up at the numerous clocks Maury had hanging, he said, "Okay, it's twelve-thirty. How late exactly are we planning to be?"

“As late as we wanna,” Rowena said smugly, flashing Maury a sweet smile. “Jimmy starts his new job today.”

“Doin’ what?”

“We still gotta figure that out,” Jimmy admitted, “but it’s down at La Belle et la Bête. I could wait tables or something—”

“Why don’t you get your ass up on stage and sing?” Maury said, his bushy brows rising in surprise. “It’s a music joint still, right?”

“Maury.” Jimmy’s ears burned. “Nah, come on.”

Rowena looked intrigued, purring, “Ohhhh, Jimmy! Can you sing?”

“In the shower!” Jimmy replied quickly. “It’s nothing special.”

“Don’t fuckin’ listen to him. Sings like a little bird,” Maury said to Rowena. “Kid is talented. Real fuckin’ talented. Give him an audition, you’ll see.”

“Mmm, guess we’ll find out,” Rowena said with a grin. “Come on. Let’s get going, Jimmy. I wanna see what you’ve got.”

“Oh, God,” Jimmy protested, clutching the jewelry box tightly to his chest as Rowena grabbed his arm. He glanced back at Maury as Rowena led him to the door, calling out, “Hey! I’ll call you later! Since I have a phone now! Bye!”

“See ya round, kid! And hey, Miss Legrand? You’re a real fine lady, but I meant what I fuckin’ said,” Maury said with a charming smile.

“I don’t intend on anyone breaking anything so much as a nail,” Rowena said in reply. “I’ll see you around, Maury.”

“Well, it’s a damn shame you gotta go, but it’s mighty fine to watch you leave.” Maury tipped his head as he shamelessly gawked at Rowena’s departing rear.

She put an extra swing in her hips as she walked out just for him, Jimmy could tell, as she cheerfully chirped, “Bye, Maury!”

Jimmy heard Maury cackling all the way out to the limo, still clinging to the jewelry box as they got in the backseat.

Rowena offered out her hand, saying, “Here. I’ll put it in my purse if that’s okay? I promise I’ll keep it safe until we go home tonight.”

“Sure,” Jimmy said, reluctantly handing it over. He watched Rowena wrap it up in a thick scarf and gently tuck it away. “Thank you, seriously.”

“Stop thanking me all the damn time,” Rowena laughed. “It’s not really that big of a deal. If you wanna make it up to me somehow, audition for me.”

“Fine,” Jimmy said, sinking down into the seat. “But trust me, I’m not that great.”

“Mmm. We’ll see,” Rowena chuckled, pouring them drinks to sip on their way to the club. Jimmy was already feeling a bit of a buzz, grateful for the alcohol to soothe his nerves. He hadn’t sung in front of an audience in a very long time.

La Belle et la Bête was a beautiful theater, and even in the daytime the lights of the marquis were incredible. Jimmy was excited to finally see what it looked like on the inside.

Jerry parked right out front, Rowena leading Jimmy around to a side door that she unlocked to allow them inside. Looping her arm in Jimmy’s, she hummed cheerfully to herself as she strolled through the empty club. Jimmy could hear a piano playing, but didn’t see one yet.

All of the seating on the ground level had been removed to make way for tables, and the theater concession area had been converted into a bar. The stage was massive, flanked by elaborate carvings of wicked beasts and roses, framed by thick red velvet curtains.

Jimmy stared dumbly at the incredible architecture, hypnotized by all the details and rich colors. He grinned, looking up at the private booths overlooking the stage. The second level looked as if it had been also been updated to hold more tables, and he could see another bar. It was absolutely magical.

Up on stage was a young man with short black hair, his nimble fingers coaxing a sweet melody from the grand piano he was seated at. He wore a *Star Wars* shirt and jeans, almost comically out of place amongst all the finery.

The young man lifted his head, a pure and adoring smile lighting up his face when he saw Rowena. He looked like an eager puppy whose master had returned home after working all day. When his eyes met Jimmy's, he frowned suspiciously.

"Hello, lovely!" Rowena greeted. "I have someone for you to meet!"

The young man stood up and peered down from the stage, waving at Jimmy. He still didn't look very pleased. "Hey."

"This is Jimmy Poe," Rowena said, giving Jimmy a little squeeze. "He's my brother's new beau, and rumor has it that he's quite the little singer."

The young man looked instantly relieved, his smile kinder now when he looked at Jimmy. "Oh, yeah?" He grinned, sitting back down at the piano. "Well, it's really nice to meet you, Jimmy. I'm Dario Romero."

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# Chapter Twelve

Jimmy managed to navigate his way through the back around the curtains and joined Dario on stage, shaking his hand with a friendly grin. “Hey, love your shirt!”

“Thanks!” Dario beamed. “*Empire* was always the best, you know?”

“Oh! Freakin’ totally!” Jimmy gushed. “Have you seen the new ones yet? Tell me, did you like—”

“Hey! Turn down the geek,” Rowena called out, taking her place at the table positioned closest to center stage. “It’s super adorable, it is, but I need to find out what we’re gonna do with you, Jimmy. If you can sing, you’re so in. If not, well, we gotta find something else.”

“Right.” Jimmy smiled sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“So, any experience singing?” Dario asked.

“I used to do choir, some glee club in high school,” Jimmy said, rubbing at the back of his neck as he approached the microphone stand. “I love musicals, show tunes, anything really.”

Dario thoughtfully ran his fingers over the keys for a moment as if trying to think of an appropriate song to test Jimmy’s singing prowess. He smirked, both of his hands moving over the piano as he appeared to come up with the perfect one.

“Seriously?” Jimmy laughed and turned around to grin at Dario as he recognized the tune immediately as ‘Since I Don’t Have You.’

“Come on, man,” Dario teased, “get your *Buckaroo Banzai* on!”

Jimmy swallowed nervously, the sound audible in the microphone. Smiling shyly down at Rowena, he forced himself to calm down. He did his best to imagine the Hong Kong Cavaliers behind him, slowly swaying his hips to the music as he began to softly sing.

Rowena’s jaw dropped, glancing down at her arm as if to check for goosebumps.

Jimmy blushed all the while, belting out the words with all his heart, his hand now resting easily on the microphone. He was more comfortable after the initial beginning, letting the words move him along, singing confidently as he went for a big finish.

Dario's fingers flew across the keys for one last chord, laughing, "Hey! Not bad, dude!"

"Not bad? Holy shit, Jimmy! You're amazing!" Rowena was on her feet, clapping and cheering. She grinned at Dario, promptly instructing him, "You two. Come up with a three song set for tonight. You'll go on at eleven. I'm going to make sure Roddy comes. He has got to hear you sing, holy fuck balls."

Jimmy gulped, eyes wide. Cold here. Listening to him sing. Watching him on stage.

*You'd let me fuck you in front of the whole world...*

Jimmy shivered.

"I think we can handle that," Dario said, giving Rowena a firm salute.

She blew him a kiss, purring, "You're a doll, Dario. Thank you! Remember, keep it cool but fun. I really wanna knock Roddy's socks off with this."

"Wow," Jimmy panted, suddenly tingly and numb. He was gonna be singing for Boss Cold—tonight. "But wait, he told me I have to be back at midnight."

"What are you, a fuckin' pumpkin?" Rowena scoffed, rolling her eyes dramatically. "Ugh. Come on. He'll come to the show, be fuckin' amazed, and I'm sure he won't even care about you being a little late for playtime."

Jimmy was not as certain.

"Now, you boys have a good time," Rowena cooed, wiggling her fingers in a little wave. "Mama's gotta go do grownup things. Dario will take good care of you, Jimmy."

"Right, uhm," Jimmy started, fidgeting. "My mom's stuff? In your purse?"

"Oh, right! I'll go put it in the safe in Roddy's office right now, okay?"

“Thank you,” Jimmy said, sighing in relief. “See you later!”

“Bye, Jimmy!” she called, pausing to offer Dario an extra sweet smile. “Bye bye, Dario.”

Dario grinned dopily, a love-struck expression Jimmy knew all too well, waving at Rowena and watching her every movement until she disappeared into the back. Jimmy tried not to smile, but he couldn’t help it. It was very clear Dario had quite the crush.

“So, you and Boss Cold?” Dario asked casually, glancing sideways at Jimmy.

“Yeah. It’s complicated. Uhm... so, you and Rowena?”

“Also complicated,” Dario said. “As in, I worship her, but I basically don’t exist in her world. She’s the Princess Leia to my Momaw Nadon.”

“Wait, who?” Jimmy’s brow scrunched up. “The... hammerhead guy in *A New Hope*?”

“Exactly,” Dario said sadly. “Not exactly a leading man, you know. He didn’t even have a name when they put out his action figure the first time. That’s me. Plus, I’m kind of terrified of Cold. He doesn’t like any of Rowena’s boyfriends, like ever, and they never stick around long.”

“You mean like Dickie?” Jimmy inquired carefully.

Dario’s face darkened. “Hey, fuck that prick. I’m glad he’s dead. He got exactly what he deserved.”

“Sorry,” Jimmy said quickly, frowning at the sudden burst of venom. “I didn’t mean to... you know.”

“How long have you and Cold been seeing each other?” Dario asked curiously, more than happy to divert the conversation though he still looked grim.

“Like, three days?”

“Fuck, man,” Dario laughed, shaking his head. “You are in for a lot of surprises. Now, I can play pretty much anything, but the band really only

knows the golden oldies. Like, ol' Sinatra, Perry Como, and lots of other very talented and equally deceased people. Classic, totally, but stiff as hell."

"Band?"

"Uh, yeah," Dario said flatly. "You know, people with instruments?"

Jimmy plopped flat on his butt on the stage, his head starting to swim. Singing in front of Cold with a live band and less than a day to practice? There was so much that could go wrong. "This is a lot more complicated than singing in the shower."

"Hey, hey," Dario soothed. "My man. *Mi amigo*. Jimmy. I'm here to make you look good. You look good, I look good, okay?"

"Okay," Jimmy said. He took a deep breath, smiling nervously and hugging his knees.

"And together, we're gonna what?"

Jimmy stared.

"We're gonna look *really* good," Dario said smugly, giving Jimmy a proud finger gun display. "All you gotta do is trust me, I got you."

"Okay," Jimmy said, still completely stumped as to how to proceed. "So..."

Idly tapping across the piano keys, Dario asked politely, "Would you like me to make some suggestions?"

"Oh, God, yes, please."

"Open with Sinatra's 'The Way You Look Tonight,' okay? It's like, a freakin' staple here, and it'll help get the band warmed up to you. And honestly, 'Since I Don't Have You.' The band has totally played it before, and plus, I gotta get my nerd on a little bit, and you know that one."

"Okay. I've never really sung Sinatra. Can we work on that?"

"Of course! Anything special you wanna do for the last song? Rowena said we could have a little fun. Maybe somethin' sexy for your man." Dario waggled his eyebrows. "Marvin Gaye? Some Prince?"

“Oh, I know exactly what I wanna do,” Jimmy said with a crooked little grin. The song came to him in an instant, and he added hesitantly, “Do you, uh, know any Halsey?”

“Yeah,” Dario said, intrigued. “What song?”

Jimmy pulled out his new phone, poking around until he was able to retrieve the internet browser. He did a quick search, showing the video result to Dario.

“Oh, I can totally dig it,” Dario said with a big thumbs up. “I’m thinking, minimal music. Like, just me on piano and you singing. Maybe light strings, our violinist is a pretty quick study. Just go all Mariah Carey up there, and it’ll sound great. I know you’ve got the range.”

“Do you think... do you think he’ll like it?” Jimmy asked bashfully. “Cold, I mean.”

Dario tucked his hair behind his ears. “Uh, guess there’s only one way to find out?”

That hadn’t been the answer Jimmy was looking for, putting his phone away with a sigh. “I have no idea what I’m doing here. I thought I’d be bussing tables or something.”

“Hey,” Dario said, trying for a reassuring smile. “I’ve worked here for seven years. Actually started off as a busboy myself until Cold heard me messin’ around on the piano at the end of my shift one night. He didn’t know me from crap, but he could see I had talent, so he offered me a new job.”

“Really?” Jimmy smiled softly.

“Cold sees potential in people,” Dario said with a humble shrug of his shoulders. “Things they didn’t even think they had in them. Diamond in the rough stuff. He’s good at that, looking at people, figuring out how he can use them better.”

“Use them? You mean to exploit them?” Jimmy asked, a frown wrinkling his brow.

“Okay, it’s not like he’s a saint,” Dario conceded. “Far freakin’ from it. He’s Emperor level scary, no offense. But it’s like...” He was thoughtful for a moment before saying, “Okay, you know how your parents always tell you that you can be anything when you grow up? As long as you try real hard?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, let’s say you wanna be an engineer, but you totally suck at math. You would waste your whole life trying to do something that you’re gonna blow nuts at. But Cold sees that you’re super good at like, I dunno, gardening or whatever! And he has you go become a master landscaper and you totally rule the Green with Swamp Thing.”

“Still not following.”

“Nobody is nobody, and everyone has something to offer,” Dario said with a smirk.

“Are you seriously quoting *Buckaroo Banzai* now?” Jimmy scoffed.

“Yes! But it’s from the DVD feature. Anyway, it’s true! Everyone does have something to offer, and Cold will always find a way to get it. Everything he does is for a reason, and it’s always to benefit himself. But it’s also benefiting you. The best version of you is what will help him the most, and he will nurture that.”

“Okay, so, what’s your point?” Jimmy demanded, getting a little cross and folding his arms over his chest.

“My point is that Cold had you come here for a reason,” Dario said, holding out his hands in apology. “As long as I’ve worked here, you’re the first guy I’ve ever even heard of him dating. Or... whatever it is you’re doing. He definitely didn’t get you a job here to set you up for failure.”

“But he didn’t even know I could sing,” Jimmy protested.

“Are you sure about that?”

Jimmy thought of his shower serenading and blushed softly. “Okay, maybe. But Rowena didn’t know until—”

“Look, with that voice? It was gonna come out eventually.” He twiddled his fingers across the keys, a sly smile lighting up his face. “Maybe, just maybe, we can cook up a little bit of a surprise for Cold tonight, huh?”

“Yeah?” Jimmy rubbed his hands together, smiling again now. He got back up to his feet, giving Dario awkward finger guns in reply and a big grin. “Let’s freakin’ do this.”

“Easy there, Brisco,” Dario snorted. “Put those things away before you shoot your eye out.”

“Right, sorry,” Jimmy chuckled sheepishly.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

They had roughly six hours to practice before the club opened, and another two before Jimmy would be due on stage. They ran through the whole set dozens of times, Jimmy struggling with the unfamiliar Sinatra tune in particular.

As Dario ran him through the set for the millionth time, Jimmy found himself thinking about what they had discussed earlier. The day he met Cold, and Cold had wrapped his hands around Jimmy’s neck, waking something deep inside of Jimmy that he never knew was there. He didn’t know if this submissive temperament was the best possible version of himself, but in a way... it felt like it was.

He had never tried so hard to please someone before, pushing his body and his mind beyond what he had ever thought possible. He loved every second of his self-discovery, and Cold always left him aching for more. Most important, he had never been as happy with anyone as he was with Cold.

Now here he was, only a few hours away from performing in front of a live audience. No one had ever believed in him as much as the gangster did, and Jimmy didn’t want to let him down.

The band arrived shortly before opening and Jimmy was thrilled to practice with such talented musicians. They only had enough time for a few brief rehearsals, but he felt better about his performance already. Rowena had

returned to catch the last song, the one by Halsey, and squealed excitedly, jumping up on stage to grab Jimmy and pull him into a hug.

“Oh, my God! Roddy’s panties are going to fuckin’ drop!”

Jimmy patted her shoulder awkwardly, sensing Dario’s eyes drilling holes into his back. “You should really be thanking Dario! I mean, I really couldn’t have done it without him!”

“Aw! Dary!” Rowena released Jimmy to immediately glom Dario, smooching his cheek and wrapping her arms around him. “Thank you so much! Unnph, it’s so good!”

Dario looked positively euphoric, mouthing a silent ‘I love you’ to Jimmy and hugging Rowena back. “Anything for you, Roe.”

Rowena teased his hair a little, then had her attention back on Jimmy, snapping her fingers. “Okay, now! I took the liberty of getting you a tux because I’m what? Amazing. Now, come on. I’ll show you to your new dressing room.”

Following Rowena backstage, Jimmy managed to catch one last glimpse of Dario’s blushing and blissed out face. He wondered if that’s what he looked like around Cold, shrugging off the thought as Rowena led him to a moderately sized dressing room. It looked as if it had once been used for storage, with several boxes and sundries still stacked up against the far wall.

Hanging on a clothes rack was a slick black garment bag. Rowena had also procured some hair styling products and cologne, lined up across a small vanity.

“Here ya go, sweetie! Get ready and come find me at the bar. We’ll get you a bit of liquid courage and some food, okay?”

“Wait!” Jimmy looked around quickly, frowning. “Did you bring me any other shoes?”

“Wear the Chucks!” Rowena drawled, planting her hand on her hips. “They’re black! Trust me, it’ll look so good!”

The door shut, leaving Jimmy to start getting dressed alone. He fixed his hair and sprayed on the cologne, checking himself out the mirror. Rowena

was right, the sneakers totally worked.

Finding her at the bar, he immediately got her approval and a Long Island iced tea to go with it. The club filled up quickly as the hours ticked by, Dario leading the band throughout the evening, his piano always stealing the show. Jimmy was impressed; Dario really was incredibly good. But as much as he was enjoying the music, there was still no sign of Cold.

“Are you sure he’s coming?” Jimmy asked, his voice strained with worry.

Rowena rolled her eyes, squeezing Jimmy’s shoulders. “Yes, I told him what time you were going on, and he yelled at me about messing with your schedule, and blah blah blah.” She wagged her hand, imitating a yapping mouth. “Don’t worry about it, it’ll be fine.”

Jimmy didn’t feel reassured at all.

“Just keep your eye up on that booth,” Rowena soothed, running her nails through Jimmy’s hair, nodding to the private box overlooking the stage. “He will be there. Now, finish your drink and get your cute butt backstage. It’s almost time!”

Jimmy gulped down the alcohol, giving her an obedient salute as he headed to the back. The band had taken a brief break, and he saw Dario hurrying up to him. He had changed into a tuxedo too, gold and black, and also happened to be wearing Chuck Taylors.

“Nice kicks!” Dario laughed, giving Jimmy a high five.

“Yeah, you, too!” Jimmy smiled nervously.

“Remember. Make me look good, okay? You got this.”

Jimmy watched Dario hurry out in front of the curtains to take his seat at his piano, waiting for his cue to go. He heard the first few notes of ‘The Way You Look Tonight,’ took a deep breath, and stepped out onto the stage, smiling brightly at the audience as his heart dropped into his intestines. Holy crap, that was a lot of people. Even with the lights shining down on him, he could still see that there was quite a crowd.

He glanced up at the private box overlooking the stage.

Still empty.

There was a light smattering of applause as Jimmy moved to the microphone. He glanced behind him to nod at Dario, his new friend smiling and giving him a wink. Jimmy smiled anxiously back and began to sing.

Jimmy let his body sway to the rhythm, his eyes wandering over the audience. He never really looked at anyone in particular, letting his voice carry throughout the theater and losing himself in the music.

As the song began to draw to a close, he could feel someone looking at him, more potent than anyone else. It was a distinct sensation that made him shiver and all the little hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

Jimmy looked upward just as he finished, smiling brightly upon seeing that the private booth was now occupied by Boss Cold and Jules Price. His heart flipped when he realized that they were talking to each other, and Cold didn't seem to be paying him any attention.

Gulping nervously, Jimmy nearly flubbed the opening for 'Since I Don't Have You.' He sang it flawlessly though, the full swing of the band behind him, and had never felt so proud of himself. And yet, Cold was still talking to Jules.

Jimmy took a shaky breath as the lights on the stage dimmed, the only illumination now on Dario and himself. Dario's fingers began to move once more, and Jimmy swore he was playing in time with the dull, anxious thumping of his own heart. If Dario was right, Cold had planned all of this for him; to get him on this stage, to perform.

Jimmy thought he had been doing a good job, but down in his soul he knew he could do better. He didn't want to disappoint Cold, making up his mind to give this last song everything he had.

Jimmy began with a soft purr, the song speaking of demons and making a deal with the devil. Self-doubt and insecurity was keeping the narrator down, but there was a man who would help lift him up, for the price of his obedience.

Cold visibly shifted in his seat, finally glancing down at Jimmy. Their eyes met, and suddenly there was no one else in the theater. Jimmy could still

hear the piano behind him, but everything else vanished. The theater was empty except for the two of them.

When he belted out the first line of the chorus, singing of selling his soul to the man in a three-piece suit, he grasped the microphone and pointed right up at Cold. He smiled slyly, continuing on in a soulful purr. Holding the final note of that line, Jimmy heard several cheers erupting prematurely from the audience. Dario held off for a beat so Jimmy could really show off his voice.

Cold had leaned farther forward, his hand clutching the railing in front of him, completely entranced.

Jimmy swept a hand through his hair, his voice dropping back down to a seductive drawl as he dove into the next verse. Behind him, another spotlight lit up, a violinist getting into position. Both of Cold's hands were on the railing now, his icy eyes positively on fire as he looked down at Jimmy. His lips were parted in awe as if witnessing something divine, and that was all the confidence Jimmy needed to finish strong.

He sang passionately, his soul threatening to leave his body as his emotions made his voice louder and stronger than ever. The words declared the narrator property of the man in the three-piece suit, down on both knees for him as his holy servant. The violinist jumped in then, she and Dario playing a fantastic and intense crescendo as Jimmy continued to push himself to new heights.

Breathing deep to push out the raw power of his voice for the last part of the bridge, Jimmy sang more softly, joined only by the violin. He held the last note as long as he could, basking in the whistling and gasping bubbling up from the audience. But Jimmy didn't hear any of them. It was only him and Cold still, the gangster totally spellbound by his voice. It didn't seem like there was an inch of space between them despite Cold being in the balcony, and Jimmy would swear that he could smell Cold's cologne and feel the sweet touch of his breath at his neck in that moment.

Dario's piano came back in when Jimmy finally had to let the note he'd been holding go, guiding them back through the chorus one final time. Wrapping both of his hands around the microphone, Jimmy put all of his

heart into the final few lines, whipping his head back and moving his body as he sang—all for Cold.

The audience erupted into a furious round of applause the moment Dario hit the final chord, Jimmy staring all around as he came back to reality. He looked quickly back to Cold, grinning like a fool. Cold was actually up on his feet applauding. His face was calm as always, but there was a twinkle in his eye as he smirked down at Jimmy.

The rest of the audience rose to their feet, prompting Jimmy to take a bow. He grinned stupidly, mostly up at Cold, as a warm sensation filled him from his scalp down to his toes when the gangster winked at him. Taking a few more bows, he practically floated off the stage to the sound of vigorous applause and fervent cheering. The band still had one more set to play, but Rowena met him the second he stepped off stage, squealing and hollering excitedly.

“Oh, my God! Absolutely fuckin’ panty-droppin’ shit! Good shit!”

Jimmy blushed all over, his senses tingling with adrenaline and the thrill of performing. “I did it, holy crap, I did it!”

“Fuck, yes!” Rowena cheered. “Let’s go get you a drink!”

One drink turned into several, and Jimmy was stunned by how many people came up to him to compliment him on his performance. He kept looking for Cold, but he hadn’t seen him since the last song ended. He’d disappeared, leaving Jimmy wanting of the man’s company more than ever.

Dario came to congratulate him too and stare longingly at Rowena while they shared a toast. The patrons began to dwindle as the club got ready for closing, the band packing up for the night as well. Jimmy was happily buzzed, his bow tie askew and his cheeks rosy.

Tonight had been fantastic.

The last of the staff were getting ready to leave and most of the lights had been turned off except the globes that lined the bottom of the stage and the neons of the bar. Dario had to tap out when Rowena started breaking out the shots, leaving Rowena and Jimmy by themselves.

“You think you can do that at least three times a week?” Rowena giggled. “Because holy shit, sweetie. I’ve never seen a fuckin’ standing ovation like that. Not like, ever.”

“I can try,” Jimmy giggled back. “I gotta ask your brother first to make sure it’s okay. Fuck! Your brother. It’s so not midnight. It’s like, three in the morning. Crap. Do you know where he is? Ohhhh, I still gotta get my mom’s stuff. Did he go back home?”

Rowena grinned like a cat, tapping away on her phone. She smirked, eyes flicking over a message before looking up at Jimmy. “Oh, he’s around,” she said innocently. “Just had some business to take care of... But he’s back.”

“Back? Where?”

Rowena cleared her throat dramatically, motioning toward the stage.

Jerking his head around, Jimmy gasped when he saw Boss Cold standing next to Dario’s piano, holding a bottle of champagne and two glasses. He wore a three-piece suit as always, this one a rich charcoal pinstripe that made Jimmy’s knees weak. He smirked, setting down the champagne and beckoning Jimmy over with a crook of his finger.

Rowena hummed loudly, very pleased with herself as she said, “Mmmmm, well, I hope you boys have a wonderful time! I’m sure I’ll see you soon.” She gave Jimmy a big hug and kissed his cheek. “Mmph. You really did great, sweetie. Good night!”

“Good night,” Jimmy said, his eyes moving back to Cold waiting patiently for him on stage. He hurried back behind the curtains, eager and quick, but suddenly awkward once they were face to face again.

Singing to Cold had felt so intimate, almost spiritual, and the air between them seemed charged with a different kind of energy than usual. He smiled sweetly up at the gangster, eyeing the champagne. “Are we celebrating?”

“Oh, we have a lot to celebrate,” Cold drawled, setting down the glasses next to the champagne. He lifted a sly brow, his gaze darkening with lust as he purred, “And we also have to discuss your punishment, of course.”

“Punishment?” Jimmy’s face dropped.

“Yes, Mr. Poe,” Cold replied, sitting down leisurely at the piano. “You were instructed to return to me by midnight, and it’s well past that now. Perhaps you’re in need of another lesson, hmm?”

Jimmy gulped.

Oh, crap.

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# Chapter Thirteen

A punishment, Cold had said.

Jimmy’s stomach was dancing with trepidation and excitement, his loins beginning to stir. He knew what kind of punishments Cold enjoyed, and he couldn’t deny how much he liked them as well. But still, how was this fair?

“Rowena said she talked to you,” Jimmy argued stubbornly. “She told you __”

“Is your arrangement with Rowena?” Cold said abruptly, popping the cork off the champagne bottle. He snorted at Jimmy, pouring them each a glass. “No, your arrangement is with me. And if I give you an order, I expect it to be followed.”

“But the show—”

“Was incredible,” Cold said, raising his brows, “but you still disobeyed me.”

Jimmy’s pulse started to race, causing him to squeak the tip of his sneaker against the stage floor. The compliment won over his frustration. “You really liked it?”

Cold waved him over, offering him a glass of champagne. “Mmm, well, we are celebrating, aren’t we?”

“How did you know?” Jimmy asked after taking a gleeful sip.

“Know what?” Cold countered coyly.

“That I could sing.”

“You’re not exactly quiet in the shower, Mr. Poe,” Cold said with a tiny hint of a smile, drinking his champagne slowly.

Jimmy blushed. “So, this was your plan all along, huh?”

“Perhaps.” Cold stood up, his hand gently resting on the side of Jimmy’s neck, thumb gently tracing along his jaw.

Jimmy gulped down his champagne, his head starting to swim from Cold's seductive touch.

"Tell me," Cold asked in a smooth drawl, "did you like it... everyone watching you?"

"Yes." Jimmy closed his eyes. "But I liked you watching me the best."

Cold hummed at that, finishing off his champagne and setting his glass on top of the piano. He took Jimmy's away to join it, sighing as he glanced over his lean frame hungrily. He began to slowly loosen Jimmy's bow tie, opening up his shirt and sliding it off along with his jacket.

Jimmy's pulse was racing from Cold's smooth divesting. He loved how he undressed him, always with such care and patience. He watched him carefully fold everything and drop the clothes on the floor by the bench, shivering when Cold's strong hands rested on his hips and squeezed hard.

"How would you like to see your name out on that marquis, hmm?" Cold asked. "Maybe I could watch you sing every night?"

"Are you serious?" Jimmy balked, blinking in surprise. "You'd... you'd do that?"

Picking Jimmy up effortlessly, Cold set him on top of the piano. "I would," he said as he sat down on the bench between Jimmy's long legs. He smirked slyly, playfully stroking Jimmy's calf as he added, "Under certain conditions, of course."

"Oh. Of course." Jimmy couldn't help but giggle, grinning down at him. He wondered if he'd ever be able to taste those wicked lips. "So, another deal?"

"Mmhm." Cold untied Jimmy's sneakers, dropping them onto the floor with the clothes. His socks followed after. "But one thing at a time. First, there is the matter of your punishment, Mr. Poe."

Next, Cold began to unfasten Jimmy's pants, slowly sliding them down his legs. He ran his fingers up over Jimmy's thighs before grabbing the hem of his briefs and dragging those down as well. Then he squeezed Jimmy's knees, pushing them apart.

Jimmy smiled at all the affection. Cold was touching him more and more now. He couldn’t get enough of it, scooting his butt to the very edge of the piano, his feet dangling against the keys as he tried to get closer. A few scattered notes played as his toes tried to find a firm hold, gasping when Cold grabbed him.

Easing Jimmy’s legs over his shoulders, Cold licked his lips. Jimmy wanted to reach out and touch, but kept his hands firmly in place behind him. So far this didn’t feel like a punishment, but the anticipation was thick and heavy. His cock was stiffening up, as he leaned back on his hands and bit his lower lip anxiously.

Cold leaned forward, pushing Jimmy’s hips up and running his tongue flat against his hole with a ravenous growl.

“Fuck,” Jimmy whimpered. Cold licked and sucked so sweetly, he was falling apart in moments. Cold’s tongue was amazingly dexterous, slipping deep inside and curling so perfectly that Jimmy’s legs were already shaking.

Humming contently, patient as always, Cold lavished Jimmy’s hole with long, flat licks and scorching kisses before his fingers smoothly slipped inside him. Jimmy slouched down, trembling as Cold’s fingers tore out the most beautiful sounds from him. He was soon flat on his back, digging his heels in to bring Cold closer.

Cold shifted forward to better allow his tongue to tease around where his fingers pressed, the piano keys protesting as he got more passionate, pulling away for breath before diving in again. His fingers curled just so, making Jimmy moan loudly, the sound echoing throughout the empty club.

Jimmy was perspiring, his back arching off the piano as Cold made him see stars, panting and crying out, “God... Cold,” he warned breathlessly, “I’m close.”

Cold moved his fingers and got his tongue back to work, his hand fumbling for something on top of the piano. Jimmy was trying to thrust his hips down against Cold’s face, wanting his tongue deeper, harder, anything to carry him over the edge. Then there was a sudden splash of cold liquid pouring over his stomach, and he jerked up onto his elbows with a startled whine.

He stared down at Cold in a mix of horror and betrayal since the shock of the cool temperature had nearly killed his erection.

Cold was busy pouring the rest of the champagne down Jimmy's body, chuckling happily as he sucked at his thighs and balls, lapping it up greedily. Jimmy shivered. His nipples were hard, and the chill was making his body more sensitive. He shuddered again at how voracious Cold was, dunking the last few drops over Jimmy's cock and licking a hungry path up his shaft with his tongue to chase them down.

It wasn't long before Jimmy was hard again, relaxing against the piano as Cold got him right back to where he was before. Jimmy's hands struggled to find something to hold onto, dragging his fingertips through his hair as Cold buried his face between his legs. It was hard to believe he had Boss Cold down between his thighs. He was the king of Strassen Springs, a monster and a fiend, and he was eating Jimmy's ass like he was starved for it.

"Close, please," Jimmy pleaded, smug that at least Cold didn't have any more champagne to dump on him. He started pushing his hips down to gain more friction, his body tensing up in anticipation of what was sure to be a spectacular orgasm. "Please, let me come, sir."

"No," Cold purred shortly, roughly gripping the base of Jimmy's cock and squeezing tight.

The wind was knocked right out of Jimmy's lungs, all his pleasurable feelings crashing into a brick wall. His cock was throbbing from being denied, he was right there! His balls were absolutely aching for release. Jimmy banged his head against the piano, mewling in frustration.

"Not yet," Cold said sternly, pulling his hand away when he was sure Jimmy wasn't going to come.

"But... sir?" Jimmy tried, his voice broken with need. "Please?"

"This is a punishment, remember?" Cold reminded him smugly. "To remind you who you belong to."

Jimmy moaned at that, scrubbing his hands over his face. It was too hot in here, and his desperation to orgasm was overwhelming. "I'm yours," he

promised. “Please, I’m all yours.”

“Prove it,” Cold commanded. “Don’t come until I tell you that you can... no matter what. You only listen to me. Not to Rowena, not to anyone else. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy gurgled, trying not to sob. He wanted to be good for Cold, but he wanted to come so badly. The desire to relieve the pressure between his legs was maddening, and he took a few quick breaths to calm down.

Cold’s fingers were circling his hole again, not yet intruding, simply teasing and petting. He slid them up to touch the top of Jimmy’s cock, dabbing the droplets of pre-cum that had started collecting. “There,” he praised, sensing that Jimmy was relaxing. “Good boy.”

Jimmy smiled at the compliment, his chest swelling with pride. He was doing better, he could make Cold happy. He could do this. He let Cold touch and pet him however he pleased, moaning gratefully when his fingers plunged back inside of him. Jimmy was writhing once more in moments, the piano keys singing out as Cold changed angles, shifting closer.

He gasped as Cold suddenly stood up, Jimmy’s legs still up on his shoulders, driving his fingers even deeper. Jimmy’s head fell back against the piano, wishing he could reach out and grab Cold’s vest, his shirt. He wanted more contact, something else to bridge them together other than his magical fingers that were currently reducing his senses to oatmeal.

He could feel his orgasm building again and grit his teeth as he tried to fend it off. Hearing Cold growl contently, he glanced up to see a flash of teeth as Cold leered down at him. Cold pulled his beautiful fingers free to slide on a condom judging by the telltale crinkle sounds.

Jimmy didn’t know where the lube came from, but Cold’s cock was slick and hot, nudging against his hole.

“Grab your legs, hold them up for me.”

Pulling his legs back as ordered, Jimmy grabbed behind his knees. It felt dirty to display himself like this, his face burning hot as Cold gazed approvingly down at him.

Cold rubbed the head of his cock around Jimmy’s open hole. “Beautiful...” He moved his other hand up over Jimmy’s lean stomach, his thumb grazing his belly button as he traveled up to press his palm against his throat. His fingers began to tighten. “Yes?”

“Yes,” Jimmy sighed, his body offering no resistance.

Cold squeezed enough to make Jimmy gasp, his cock thrusting into him in one fluid slam. Tears in his eyes as Cold fucked him ruthlessly, Jimmy whimpered. Cold was punishing him now, making Jimmy cry out and scream, the brutal snap of their bodies cracking like a whip. But even though Jimmy couldn’t explain it, the way Cold held his throat didn’t scare him at all.

He trusted Cold completely, and Cold never applied enough pressure to restrict Jimmy’s breathing. It made him feel safe somehow, every sensation a hundred times more intense, and he loved how possessively Cold’s fingers would curl when Jimmy moaned particularly loudly.

Cold shrugged one of Jimmy’s legs up over his shoulder, leaning over him and fucking with long, deep thrusts. The angle was so good, too good, Jimmy scrambling to reach down and grab his cock to stop himself from coming. He ached all over, overstimulated and raw, and sobbed loudly as he denied himself release.

“Good boy,” Cold said proudly. He let go of Jimmy’s throat, both of his hands latching onto his narrow hips as he worked their bodies together. His movements were more passionate now, less cruel, making sure every sound that left Jimmy’s lips was a cry of pleasure.

Jimmy gave himself over completely, smiling as he let Cold move him however he wanted. Cold was looking down at him with that same awestruck expression he’d had when he was listening to Jimmy sing. His entire face was softer, his eyes lighter, and all the years melted right off of him.

Jimmy had to touch him. He had to. Fingers shaking, he reached out, lightly tracing over Cold’s cheekbone. To his amazement, Cold didn’t smack him away. His eyes closed halfway, lost somewhere, only to snap open a moment later and gaze down at Jimmy with an intensity that took his breath

away. He had slowed down to nearly a crawl, but each thrust still wreaked a low moan from Jimmy's lips.

Braver still, Jimmy cupped Cold's cheek with his palm, whispering, "You're so beautiful."

The emotions that suddenly broke out over Cold's face were startling. Hurt, anger, indignation, all in a quick flash that left his icy eyes wet with unshed tears, his lips parting as if to speak.

But he suddenly froze, his head snapping around to glare over his shoulder as he drew his gun from under his jacket. "Someone had better be fuckin' dead!"

"Well, someone hopefully will be soon," came the smooth and deranged voice of Francis Von Valdemar, punctuating his words with a loud giggle. Thirdsies was with him, both leering at the spectacular situation they saw before them as they walked out onto the stage.

Jimmy bolted upright, trying to hide himself behind Cold as much as possible. He grabbed onto the front of Cold's vest, wishing he could bury himself in it. The Gentlemen were at least maintaining a respectful distance, but it didn't make Jimmy feel much better about being seen like this.

Cold hadn't even taken off his jacket.

"We're so sorry to interrupt, Cold," Valdemar said with a humble bow, lecherously smirking. "Especially while you're... hmmm. While you're..."

"Tickling the ivories?" Thirdsies suggested, grinning wide.

"Ooo, that's good, son," Valdemar agreed, giggling like mad.

*They're both crazy*, Jimmy thought. Neither one of them seemed the least bit concerned that Cold had a loaded gun pointed at them, continuing to snicker and guffaw at their terrible joke.

Cold growled, his voice eerily calm as he hissed, "You have twenty seconds to tell me why you're here."

"Oh! Right! Well, you said not to interrupt you—" Valdemar began.

"Unless it was an emergency!" Thirdsies added, beaming proudly.

“And we agreed that this definitely qualified,” Valdemar exclaimed passionately.

“Spit it out,” Cold growled, his aim zeroed right in on Valdemar’s forehead. “Fifteen seconds...”

Jimmy was impressed Cold’s erection hadn’t faltered, but before Valdemar and Thirdsies could get out what was actually going on, he sensed someone staring at him. It made the little hairs on the back of his neck jump to attention, and he turned his head to see Rufus Corman standing behind him on the other side of the stage.

Corman stared unabashedly at Jimmy with a nasty smile, and while he couldn’t see much from the angle he was at, Jimmy could still feel his skin trying to crawl right off his bones. Corman’s nose was bandaged and one of his eyes was swollen and black; Cold really had beat the hell out of him.

No one had ever looked at him with such hatred and disgusting intent. It made Jimmy feel sick. He pressed against Cold, feeling him tense, but he didn’t push Jimmy away.

“Larry, Curly, and Moe are all here,” Valdemar exclaimed finally, eyes wide as if this was exciting news. “Here in Strassen Springs. Right now.”

Jimmy was certain it was another stupid joke, terrified that he was about to see Valdemar get shot right in the face, but Cold’s upper lip twitched. He lowered his gun, tucking it back into the holster under his jacket. “How long?”

“Larry and Curly have been here since yesterday apparently,” Thirdsies supplied quickly. “Moe just got here tonight.”

Cold bared his teeth, the gears in his brain almost visibly turning as he processed this new information.

“We should make a move tonight,” Corman said smoothly. “Their return is an obvious insult to your power. We should—”

“We should not act rashly,” Cold hissed. He was clearly furious that Corman would dare suggest such a thing, but he remained calm. In a very stern tone, he commanded, “Do nothing until I say so. Spread the word...

No one makes a move. We'll deal with this in the morning. Keep your eyes open, remain vigilant, but nothing goes down without my permission."

Valdemar gave a solemn salute, stating proudly, "We will await your orders, oh Cold One."

"You got it, Boss." Thirdsies nodded obediently.

Corman snarled, but shrugged, replying cordially, "Whatever you say, Boss."

Winding his arm possessively around Jimmy's waist, Cold glared at Corman. How Corman was looking at Jimmy had clearly not escaped his attention. "Damn right it's whatever I say. Now, all of you. Get out."

Jimmy sagged in relief, grateful they were all going to be leaving as he leaned his forehead against Cold's chest.

Cold smirked smugly down at Jimmy. "I have some ivory that needs tickling, after all."

Jimmy felt his face turned a lovely shade of red as Valdemar and Thirdsies snickered and scattered like ghosts, disappearing as quickly as they'd arrived. Corman lingered, however, gazing over the length of Jimmy's spine with a dark smile. He and Cold stared each other down for a few tense moments before Corman finally departed.

Once they were alone, Cold gently touched Jimmy's cheek. He didn't say anything, but there was a definite hint of concern as he looked him over.

"I'm okay," Jimmy said softly. "Corman just creeps me out." He could still feel Cold's cock hard inside of him, his own erection nearly wilted away. He was wise enough not to try to find out who the Three Stooges were. It was obviously some kind of code name, but he didn't dare ask.

"So, tickling my ivory?" Jimmy said instead, trying for a playful smile.

Cold actually laughed. It was short and unexpected, breathy and deep, but he had laughed. His eyes were mirthful as he purred, "Amongst other things..."

Jimmy gasped as Cold's arm squeezed him, guiding his long legs back around his waist. He tilted his head down, nosing along Jimmy's throat. Jimmy could feel the softest tease of teeth, and his breath stuttered in his throat. Cold's hands glided over his thighs to his hips, fingers squeezing softly as his cock began to thrust once more. He continued to breathe along Jimmy's neck, lightly nipping at his ear.

Jimmy was melting all over, his hands struggling to find somewhere to rest. Cold grabbed his arm, lifting it around his neck, leaving Jimmy stunned for a few seconds. He held on tight, their faces only inches away from each other. Leaning back on his other hand to brace himself, he groaned as Cold began to slam into him harder, legs tightening around Cold's waist and fingers clawing at the back of his head.

A particularly deep thrust made him yelp. He wanted Cold to hit that spot again.

Giving up his hold around Cold's neck to grab his hip, firm and warm, he gasped as he got another hard slam. Jimmy bit his lip, feeling brave, and slid his hand lower to grab a handful of Cold's ass.

God, and he had a nice ass—full, round, firm. There was still a thin layer of underwear separating him from feeling flesh, but Jimmy was so grateful he was being granted permission to touch him like this.

Cold pushed forward, his legs smacking against the piano keys as he began to pant, growling deeply. The energy between them was changing, feeling less and less like a punishment and more intimate with every thrust. Jimmy whimpered, his balls throbbing as his orgasm began to approach again. He was desperate, trying like hell to tilt his hips in just the right position to stave off the inevitable. He couldn't focus, couldn't concentrate. He knew he couldn't come yet, and it was torture.

"Fuck!" Jimmy cried, knowing by Cold's litany of pants and growls that he was getting close too. Jimmy gritted his teeth, his head tipping back and his feet clenching tight. He didn't know how much longer he could last. He was certain his balls were going to implode if Cold didn't come soon and stop fucking him like this.

Squeezing Cold’s ass, Jimmy tried to encourage him to finish, but Cold decided to slow down again apparently out of spite. Jimmy wanted to die, his head tipping back with a loud whimper.

Cold smiled, soothing softly, “You want it so badly, don’t you...”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy gasped, sweaty and trembling. “I can’t... I don’t know how... it’s so much, it’s... it’s too much.”

Cold thoughtfully slid his cock in and out of Jimmy’s wet hole, humming as if he was trying to decide what sides to order at dinner. He slowly began to pick up the pace again, murmuring, “Only because you sang so beautifully tonight, I’m going to grant you mercy... you can come now, but never forget. You’re only going to come because I’m giving you permission. You are mine.”

“Yours,” Jimmy whispered, his stomach dropping in relief knowing he could finally ease the burning ache inside him.

Cold grabbed his hair, giving it a hard tug before launching back into a brutal rhythm, fucking him hard as he raced down the finish line. “Mine,” he growled, eyes drilling into Jimmy’s, panting between clenched teeth. “Only mine.”

Grabbing his cock and stroking himself feverishly, Jimmy chanted, “Yes, God, I’m yours, only yours, please, fuck, yours, please, please!”

The pressure in his loins finally broke through and the rush was downright painful, making Jimmy’s head throb as his cock splattered all over his hand and stomach. He screamed, bursting into tears from the wave of sensation. The discomfort was diluted by intense ecstasy, his body lost to waves of pleasure as his cock kept spurting wildly.

Cold finished in a much less dramatic fashion, but seemed no less pleased. He grunted, pressing his nose against Jimmy’s throat. “Good job, Mr. Poe.”

Jimmy leaned against him, smiling as he tried to catch his breath. “Hey... you, too.”

Chuckled softly, Cold cradled the back of Jimmy’s head and pressed their foreheads together for a few precious beats, then grunted as he began to pull

away.

Jimmy reached out, trying to put his hand on Cold's face again. He wanted to recapture that feeling from before, that intense moment when he had told Cold he was beautiful. He didn't want this to end yet. But Cold grabbed Jimmy's wrist, leaving him floundering in disappointment. Jimmy couldn't hide how much the rejection stung. He knew he was getting closer to Cold, but he wanted validation.

As if sensing the need, Cold pressed a chaste kiss against Jimmy's palm. He let it linger, sighing deeply before finally separating their bodies.

Jimmy pouted when Cold pulled out, knocking his knees together as he struggled to stay seated on the edge of the piano. Cold helped him stand up before fixing his pants. Jimmy didn't see what Cold did with the condom, but with one quick zip the gangster looked as if nothing had happened.

Jimmy, meanwhile, was still a naked and trembling mess, grateful for Cold's strong hands to assist him. He got dressed, blushing at the way Cold watched him and how gently his fingers brushed against him. His legs felt stronger the more he stood on them.

"Rowena put something of mine in your safe," Jimmy said, stretching his arms above his head with a soft groan. "It's my mother's jewelry, and she sort of bought it back for me, and, well. Long story."

Cold's mouth twitched into a soft smirk. "Maury?" he asked knowingly.

"Yeah, Maury," Jimmy said. "Can we go get it before you take me home?"

"Home?" Cold snorted, glancing at his watch. "I'll go get it for you, but I'm not taking you home. Doesn't seem to be five yet. You're still on the clock, Mr. Poe."

Jimmy flushed, gawking with his mouth hanging open. "You... you're serious."

"Deadly," Cold drawled, a wicked smirk curling his lips.

Jimmy gulped.

Cold drawled with a dark chuckle, “We’re going back to my estate. I’d like to hear you sing a bit more. We have eighty-four minutes left, and I promise you that I am going to take full advantage of every last second.”

Jimmy nodded obediently, grateful when they left and he had his mother’s jewelry box in his hands again. By the time they got back inside Cold’s bedroom, there was only about forty-five minutes remaining. Jimmy didn’t think Cold could make too much mischief for him in such a short amount of time.

How wrong he was. Cold took him to bed, took him apart again, and oh, how he made him sing.

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# Chapter Fourteen

Jimmy's muscles ached in the most wonderful way. Cold had used every last second of their time together to make him fall apart, bit by bit, leaving him completely exhausted and limp against the sheets by exactly five o'clock.

Jimmy smiled when he opened his eyes and saw his mother's jewelry box sitting on the bedside table. He reached out and ran his finger over the lid, tracing the little roses. Blinking, he startled when he saw Cold suddenly walk by. He wasn't wearing a shirt.

Cold's right shoulder was visible for the briefest of moments, allowing Jimmy to drink in the lean muscle and sharp tone that he saw.

And the scars.

There were two that looked like twin sunbursts with a patch of white marbled tissue stretched out beneath them. Another long thick scar ran in between those and down his back. That was all Jimmy could see before Cold was pulling on his shirt, buttoning it quickly.

Cold didn't look at Jimmy, but he spoke quietly. "I won't be needing your services today. Take the night off."

Jimmy couldn't mask his disappointment at being denied an evening with Cold. He pouted, perking up and asking hopefully, "What about tomorrow? I'd really—"

"I'll let you know," Cold said sternly, tucking in his shirt and fastening his belt. He slid on a shoulder holster, a quick glint of silver flashing as he checked his guns. Jimmy had never noticed Cold carrying before; not until last night. He didn't know anything about guns, but he could see that Cold's were silver and big with pearl handles.

"Is everything okay?" Jimmy asked softly. He could sense a dangerous tension brewing in Cold as if he was preparing for battle.

"Fine," Cold said, well, *coldly*. He disappeared into his closet to finish getting dressed unseen.

“Okay.” Jimmy frowned, deciding to roll back over to doze. Cold was clearly not in a talkative mood, and Jimmy was a little offended by his brisk attitude. Last night had been full of so many intimate moments, and Jimmy thought he had finally made a crack in that icy armor of his. Apparently not.

Sighing softly, he pulled the blankets up over his shoulder and closed his eyes. He heard Cold come back toward the bed, but remained as he was, intent on ignoring him.

“Don’t sleep all day,” came a rumbling purr in his ear, so close that it startled him, long fingers petting through his hair.

Jimmy couldn’t help but smile in surprise, his cheeks warming up at the sweet affection. Maybe he had made a little more progress than he first thought. He opened one eye to peer up at Cold standing over him. “I can make no such guarantee.”

Cold scoffed, pulling away to adjust his tie. “Rowena will come by to see you later. She’ll have paperwork for you to sign.”

“Paperwork?” Jimmy rolled back over to face Cold, frowning.

“You’re a new employee,” Cold said dryly. “There is a standard contract for all our performers. There are also tax forms you need to fill out and vital statistics that we need for your employee file... driver’s license, social security card.”

“Seriously?” Jimmy was surprised. “This is what you meant by a new deal?”

Cold snorted, retorting sharply, “I do run legitimate businesses, Mr. Poe.”

Laughing at the idea of Cold being concerned with W-9s, Jimmy grinned.

Cold rolled his eyes and said, “I’ll text you later if anything changes. Keep your phone close.”

“And thank you for that, by the way,” Jimmy said. “I never did get a chance __”

“I’ve added the purchase price to your balance,” Cold said with a smirk. “Once you’re more fiscally stable, the monthly bill will also be yours.

Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” Cold said, turning to leave. “Goodbye, Mr. Poe.”

“Bye.” Jimmy sighed, flopping around in bed. He couldn’t fall back asleep, finally sitting up with a loud groan. Cold had left him a small card as usual.

*$223,208.18*

*I’ll see you soon.*

*-RL*

Hardly a love letter, but Jimmy smiled all the same. He got dressed back in his tux, slinging the jacket over his shoulder and grabbing his mother’s jewelry box. On his way out, he paused to get a better look at Cold’s den. Last time he was there, Rowena had been waiting for him, and he hadn’t stopped to look at anything. Now that he had a moment, he was curious. There were a few photographs and vintage concert posters, all framed and hung with great care.

There was a picture of a little girl and Cold, perhaps in his twenties and his hair already starting to gray. The girl was sitting in his lap and she was grinning, proudly showing off a missing tooth. Jimmy grinned when he recognized the little girl as Rowena.

There was another one of Rowena as a teenager, dressed up for a formal dance of some kind. Her hair was a giant brown bouffant of teased-out curls, and she was wearing a neon blue sequined dress.

The last photo was tiny, but the frame was thick and heavy as if to help protect it. It was an old Polaroid of a young woman with smooth dark skin and a smile that reeked of mischief. Her thick hair framed her face like a smoky cloud with white lilies pinned behind her ear.

Cold’s mother, Suzanne. She was beautiful.

The lilies were the same kind as those scattered all throughout the house, Jimmy realized with a small smile. He also noticed that one of the concert posters hanging up was hers, advertising a show from the early seventies. It

was bright and colorful, a heavily stylized art nouveau image of Suzanne singing.

Jimmy was sad knowing that these images might be the only things Cold had of his mother to remember her by. While Jimmy mourned his own mother's loss deeply, he at least had a few years of good memories to treasure. Cold had but a single Polaroid and an old poster.

After heading downstairs, Jimmy found Jerry the limo driver and part time chef ever diligently cooking breakfast in the kitchen, and there was no sign of Rowena. When Jimmy inquired, Jerry politely informed him that she was still recovering from last evening's celebratory activities.

"Crap, I gave her my house key." Jimmy sighed miserably. "I really need to go home."

"Ahem, *monsieur*," Jerry said, reaching into his pocket and offering out the key to Jimmy's apartment.

"Jerry! You really are amazing."

"*Oui*," Jerry chuckled heartily and winked, offering Jimmy a full plate of eggs and bacon.

Jimmy ate every bite before Jerry graciously gave him a ride back home. He was so happy to be in his own apartment. It was easy to get carried away in a fantasy when he was with Cold. His home wasn't fancy and new, but it was his. It was grounding. It helped remind him that he had a life beyond his deal with Cold. He had an innocent father in prison he still needed to free, bills to pay, a college education to finish. He had a life.

But when he was with Cold, all of that faded away. He became a slave to that smooth voice, and Cold's velvet words were an incantation designed to summon Jimmy's most intimate self. The hint of danger made it even more titillating, and Jimmy couldn't deny the thrill it gave him.

Deeper than the superficial carnal pleasures, their time together gave Jimmy a purpose, and it was one he could actually fulfill. He hadn't been successful at freeing his father or getting a degree, but with Cold, all of his shortcomings about being a failure left him. Wrapped up in Cold's seductive tones, he was always victorious. He was always good.

Jimmy puttered around his apartment, changing out of his rumpled tux and into a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. He tried to keep busy, straightening up and doing the few dishes he had left behind. He carried his mother's jewelry box into his bedroom, placing it reverently in the top drawer of his dresser and laughing when he found his new socks and underwear neatly folded in his drawers already. Jerry was one of a kind.

Looking through his closet, Jimmy was amazed at how full it was. Everything they had purchased hung neatly in plastic from the dry cleaners', his new shoes lined up together on the floor.

Jimmy thumbed through the new clothing, wondering if he should get rid of some of his old clothes. Some of it was pretty terrible, but he didn't want to get too spoiled with his current lifestyle.

It was temporary, he knew. Unless he managed to woo Boss Cold before the last night of their arrangement, he would probably end up selling most of those nice clothes and be right back in rags again.

Jimmy didn't want to think that way, deciding to stay positive and start snatching some of his old clothes from the rack. He threw them behind him, making a pile on the floor to donate.

"Hellooo!" Rowena's musical voice sang out. She had her giant purse under her arm, grinning cheerfully at Jimmy when she strolled into his bedroom.

"Hey! Uhm," Jimmy stammered in surprise. "How did you get in here?"

"Uh, duh," Rowena drawled with a long roll of her eyes, "I had a copy of your key made. Now, awww, look at you. Had a good night, huh?"

Jimmy pressed his hands over his face as if he could hide the blush coloring his cheeks. "It was fine."

"Mmmmm," Rowena hummed, waggling her eyebrows. "Thirdsies told me you and Roddy were having a lovely time making sweet music together. Don't worry, I won't tell Dario what you guys did to his piano, but he's gonna find out."

Jimmy's face reddened even more. "Oh, my God."

Quirking an eyebrow at the clothing scattered across the floor, Rowena squealed excitedly, “Oh, my God is right. Are we finally having a bonfire?”

“No,” Jimmy protested. “I’m just, you know, clearing out some stuff. I’m going to donate them.”

“Jimmy,” Rowena said slowly, taking a deep breath. “Homeless people wouldn’t use your nasty clothes to wipe their asses with. Burn it. Put those poor rags out of their misery.”

“No,” Jimmy said stubbornly. “I’m going to donate it. Take some of my good luck and you know, pay it forward.”

Making a face, Rowena set her purse down and joined him in clearing out the closet. “You’re hopeless. You’re way too sweet to be a mafia boyfriend.”

“Yeah, yeah... hey, wait!” Jimmy exclaimed when Rowena’s indiscriminate trashing had reached a faded black t-shirt. “No, not that one.”

Rowena quirked a slim brow at the ragged old AC/DC shirt. “Are you serious?”

“It’s sentimental,” Jimmy said, grabbing it back with a defiant pout.

“Oh, your dad’s?” Rowena said with an understanding nod.

“Mom’s actually,” Jimmy chuckled. “It’s from the Razors Edge Tour. She was a huge fan. She dragged my dad all the way to Paris to see them on their honeymoon. She always used to joke that it was the night I was conceived.”

“Awww, that’s so cute,” Rowena said with a sweet smile, continuing to pillage Jimmy’s old clothing and throw them aside.

“Yeah,” Jimmy laughed as he hung the precious shirt back up. “Most people were like, wow, Paris for your honeymoon? How romantic! Not my mom. Paris, pfffft. She only wanted to go there to rock out with AC/DC.”

Rowena’s smile took a softer turn. “Mom was a little bit of a groupie, huh?”

“Well, let’s just say there’s a good chance that Brian Johnson might be my real father,” Jimmy giggled.

Rowena laughed, chucking the last of the clothing that failed to pass her standards into the pile on the floor. “Need to cash in on that, you know. Oh, maybe that’s where you got those pipes from!”

“Hey, maybe!” Jimmy grinned. “Wouldn’t mind some of that rock star money.”

“Speaking of those beautiful pipes,” Rowena teased, twirling around to retrieve her giant purse. “It’s paperwork time, sweetie.”

“Right,” Jimmy said dutifully, leading Rowena to his kitchen table to start filling out the forms. She used her cell phone to scan his identification and helped him fill everything out. The last form left was the contract.

“Now,” she said, tapping her nails across the paper. “I can’t say that this is as exciting as your, ahem, current arrangement with my brother? But it’s more than fair. Twenty-five hundred a night, two nights a week guaranteed. I wanted more, but Roddy wouldn’t let me. He, cough cough, wants to keep your evenings open.”

Jimmy was dumbfounded. “That’s... that’s five grand a week.”

“Yeah, for two nights of singing pretty. Plus, weekly rehearsals. You need to get up with Dario and work some shit out.” Rowena ran her fingers through her hair, all business as she said, “Your first set was good. Keepin’ it nice with the classics, but new stuff with a jazzy twist? Mama likes. Figure out some three to five song sets. I’ll give you wiggle room with modern stuff as long as you change up the feel.”

“Got it,” Jimmy said earnestly.

“I’ll give you all of this week to practice with Dario and figure out your wheelhouse of tunes,” Rowena went on, “but I want you back on stage by Friday. That’s Roddy’s birthday. We’re having a huge party at the club, and uh, duh, you’re going to sing for him.”

Jimmy gulped.

“Any questions?”

“Not... at the moment?”

Reaching into her magical purse, Rowena pulled out a check and passed it over. “For last night. Now remember. As an independent contractor, you’re responsible for keeping some moolah aside to pay your own taxes. Blah, blah, blah. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Mmmm, I’m thinking Wednesdays and Fridays for you,” Rowena said with a happy purr. “I’m so excited to see you sing again. But! Definitely wanna make sure you and Dario have time to work your sets out. I’ll text you his number. See if he can meet you at the club tomorrow afternoon.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said, taking a deep breath. Five grand a week. He was still stunned. It wasn’t quite fulfilling his dream of working at a prestigious law firm helping those in need, but it was a hell of a paycheck.

He could get all of his stuff out of Maury’s shop, put money in his father’s commissary account, and try to find a new lawyer. He could get his life back on track no matter how this deal with Cold ended.

“Now!” Rowena declared, stashing the papers all away. “All work and no play makes Rowena a very, very bored girl.” She grinned wickedly. “Unless you already pawned it, there’s a blender here, and it’s time to party.”

“It’s like, four o’clock in the afternoon on a Sunday!”

“Pleeeaase?” Rowena said with a mournful pout. “I wanna drink and go out dancing tonight. You know you wanna go out with meee.”

Jimmy tapped his foot anxiously, indecisive. He knew he didn’t officially have an appointment with Cold this evening, but he hoped he would change his mind later. “I don’t know... I’ve only been home for a few hours, and—”

“And what? Do you need to throw more stuff in the burn pile?” Rowena whined. “Jimmy, I’ll go ahead and help you out. Just burn everything in here and start over.”

Jimmy snorted. “I was kinda wanting to stay unoccupied in case Cold... uhm. Needed me.”

“He’s gonna be pretty busy tonight,” Rowena said with a thoughtful glance at her nails.

Jimmy remembered how tense Cold seemed this morning. “Is everything okay?”

“Peachy,” she replied quickly, smiling innocently.

“Does this have to do with the Three Stooges being in Central?” Jimmy asked stubbornly.

Rowena pursed her lips, tilting her head thoughtfully. “Maaaaybe.”

“Who are they?” Jimmy pressed. When Rowena started staring off at the ceiling and humming loudly, he tried again. “If you tell me... I’ll go out tonight with you.”

“Ughhhh, fine,” she groaned, accepting defeat all too easily with a proud smile. “Look at you, bribing people for information. Maybe you do have what it takes be a mafia boyfriend!”

Jimmy couldn’t help but feel a little smug, and the word ‘boyfriend’ made his ears burn.

“Okay,” Rowena said, her nails eagerly tapping against the table. “Here’s the tea. Larry, Curly, and Moe? Luigi, Cristian, and Matteo... Luchesi.”

Jimmy’s breath was lost, his eyes widening in surprise. “You mean the same Luchesis that Cold ran out of town?”

“Yup. That’s them. Don Rafaello’s boys. You see, after Rafaello was killed, they started an all-out war amongst themselves to see who would get Daddy’s crown. They all accused each other of killing Rafaello, and no one would fess up. It was a bloodbath for years. Total chaos.”

“And that’s when Cold took over,” Jimmy supplied, blinking slowly.

“Yup,” Rowena said proudly. “My big brother is all about opportunity. After a few years of the Luchesi brothers trying to murder the crap out of each other and exhausting all their resources, Roddy got his Gentlemen together. He waited for the perfect time and made his move. He drove them all out and made Strassen Springs his bitch.”

“So, wait,” Jimmy stuttered, trying to keep up, “who killed the Don?”

“Who knows,” Rowena said with a shrug. “Maybe Matteo. He’s a total shit. I mean, we’re technically like third cousins or something? But fuck them. Everybody thinks Roddy did it to start the little gang war, but all he did was jump at the beautiful opening those idiots gave him. He didn’t kill Rafaello. One of his shitty kids probably did.”

“But all of them are back,” Jimmy continued to press. “The three sons. They’re here in the city. That’s what they told Rod last night. I mean, Cold.”

“Yeaaah. Which is super shady. The Luchesis finally learned to play nice and they rebuilt elsewhere, but they still have a lot of ties here. Who knows. They might just be in town for a wedding.”

“Or they’re planning something,” Jimmy said slowly.

Rowena tapped Jimmy’s nose. “Gold star for you!” She hopped up, heading into the kitchen and pulling several bottles of alcohol out of her purse. “You don’t need to worry. Roddy is a big boy, and he can handle this.”

Jimmy frowned, watching Rowena mix up a fruity smelling batch of drinks. He didn’t feel very reassured, a knot starting to twist up in his stomach. He hadn’t really thought about it, but Cold was in constant danger.

Rival gangsters, the cops; he wondered if that was part of why Cold made such an effort to keep him at arm’s length. Maybe the distance was to protect Jimmy.

Finding the Christmas mugs in the cabinet, Rowena filled the reindeer with alcoholic slush and handing it to him, cheering, “Drink up!”

Jimmy cringed at the tart bite when he took a sip. “God, what’s in this?”

“Raspberry vodka, orange vodka, sweet and sour mix, blue curaçao.” Rowena rattled off the ingredients with a smirk. “But I sort of fucked up the portions, so it’s mostly a shit ton of raspberry vodka.”

Trying to stomach the sweet concoction, Jimmy took a few more sips. Rowena had already finished hers and was pouring another.

“Come on,” she said with a clap of her hands. “It’s dress-up time!” She marched straight to his closet, and Jimmy didn’t even try to stop her, though he did follow, grinning as she picked out slim black jeans, a white dress

shirt, and a red blazer. She pawed through his drawers, pulling out black suspenders and a red bow tie to match the jacket.

Jimmy couldn't deny Rowena had excellent taste, more than happy to let her pick out his clothing.

"Wear your sneakers again," she said, pointing at his feet. "And, oh! Where's that ring? That pretty ruby one?"

"From my mom?" Jimmy said with a blink.

Rowena kept digging until she found the jewelry box, humming happily as she picked it out. "Yes. This one. You should totally wear it! It's fuckin' gorgeous. Red is definitely your color."

Jimmy took the ring, trying it on his fingers. It fit pretty well on his right ring finger. It was beautiful, although he wished it was clean. "Maybe," he said. "I mean, I just got all that stuff back. I don't want to lose it."

"You won't lose it," Rowena assured him. "Now, hurry up and get dressed!"

"Yes, ma'am," Jimmy said obediently, laughing as Rowena gave him some privacy to get ready. When he stepped out of his bedroom, she pounced to make some adjustments and fix his hair.

She also made sure Jimmy finished his drink before they left, and when they got in the limo, she had Jerry take them out to eat first. Rowena insisted on paying for their food, ordered more drinks, and by the time they finally arrived at the club, Jimmy was already quite tipsy.

As they walked up to the door, Jimmy gawked at the line of people waiting to get in. All Rowena had to do was smile at the bouncer, and he opened the door immediately to let them through.

"Have a fun evening, Miss Legrand!" he said politely.

"Thanks, babe!" She blew the bouncer a kiss, dragging Jimmy inside with her. "Come on, Jimmy! Let's fuckin' boogie!"

Rain was the name of the club, a massive two-story building with a dance floor on each level and four bars in total. It was loud and noisy, surprisingly full for early evening on a Sunday. Rowena held Jimmy's hand, practically

skipping onto the dance floor as infectious techno music thundered through the speakers.

Rowena was a fantastic dancer, moving flawlessly even in her tall heels. She grinded her body down to the floor and popped effortlessly back up with a smooth curl of her hips, rocking to the music without ever missing a beat.

Jimmy wasn't too bad on his feet, loose enough to let himself go and relax. He threw his hands up, enjoying the thrum of the bass pounding beneath his sneakers, twirling around and laughing.

He couldn't remember the last time he had been out dancing, laughing when Rowena grabbed his hands and gave him a spin. They had both managed to dance off their buzz after several songs, panting and sweating. Sensing sobriety approaching like an alcoholic superhero, Rowena led Jimmy off the floor and to the closest bar.

"The usual, Miss Legrand?" the bartender asked as they sat down.

"Please!" Rowena replied, waving at Jimmy. "And whatever he wants."

"Uhm, appletini?" Jimmy asked politely, grinning when Rowena gave him a thumbs up.

"Having fun?" Rowena asked happily.

"Yes! I'm having a blast!" Jimmy said, surprised as their drinks appeared almost instantly in front of them.

"Here you are, Miss Legrand," the bartender said. "Please let me know if you need anything else."

Jimmy's appletini had quite a punch, and Rowena's margarita reeked of tequila. He noticed no money had been exchanged, Rowena humming happily as she sipped at her drink.

"Okay, you've gotta tell me," Jimmy laughed. "Does everybody here know who you are?"

"Whose club do you think this is?" she giggled. "It belongs to the Gentlemen, sweetie."

“Really?” Jimmy cackled. He should have known. Sipping at his drink, he bounced his hip to the music.

“Yeah,” she said, smiling sweetly. “Stick with me, sweetie. I’ll show you just how good it is to be gangster royalty.”

One drink turned into two, and then into a few rounds of shots before Rowena deemed them intoxicated enough to get back on the dance floor. They danced until Jimmy’s legs were begging for mercy, retreating back to the bar for another round.

Jimmy plopped on the barstool, stripping off his jacket and groaning, “Holy crap, no more!”

Rowena cackled, still standing and continuing to shake her hips as they waited for their drinks. “Wussy,” she teased. “Just take a breather. I’m gonna go make a few requests in a minute.”

“Can I request crutches?” Jimmy laughed, rubbing his aching thighs.

“Come on, it’s not that bad!”

“Nah,” Jimmy conceded with a grin. “Just whew. It’s been a while, and—”

“Hey, Rowena,” a voice called out, two men approaching them with friendly smiles.

Jimmy didn’t think much of it; after all, almost everyone here seemed to know her.

“What the fuck do you want?” Rowena spat, eyes narrowed viciously.

Jimmy blinked, surprised at the sudden burst of venom. That’s when he noticed that the friendly smiles were a little too friendly, and Rowena had picked up her glass as if to throw it right at their faces.

“Just being nice, cous’,” the taller of the two said with a sneer, staring at Jimmy. “Huh. This must be Cold’s new chippie.”

Gulping nervously, Jimmy instinctively backed up into the bar. He didn’t like how these men were looking at him at all. “Who are you exactly? And how do you know who I am?”

“The tall and ugly one is Vincenzo and the short and stupid one is Gary,” Rowena answered for them, snorting disgustedly. “From the very shallow end of the Luchesi gene pool. Pretty fuckin’ sure you know that you’re not welcome here.”

“Pretty sure it’s a fuckin’ free country,” Gary snapped in reply.

Vincenzo grabbed Jimmy’s wrist, his nasty glare moving to the ring on his finger. “Nice bling. Daddy Cold give you that?”

“Hey, get your hands off me!” Jimmy barked, trying to wrench his arm away. Vincenzo wouldn’t let go, staring in confusion at the ring, and Jimmy grunted, “Hey! Come on! Fuck you, dude!”

Vincenzo still wouldn’t release him, twisting his arm until he yelped in pain, and that was the exact moment everything went very wrong.

“You stupid cock guzzling son of a bitch!” Rowena growled, her temper flying hot as she swung her foot back, driving her heel into Vincenzo’s crotch.

He fell like a sack of potatoes with an agonized groan, and started crying when Rowena kept kicking him.

“I will fucking kill you! You motherfucking dick weasel! Don’t you ever fucking touch him!”

The patrons around the bar had scattered, screaming in alarm and trying to get out of the way. Jimmy was frozen, his heart racing so fast he couldn’t draw breath, feeling it skipping beats and jumping up into the back of his throat. He watched in horror as Rowena kept driving her foot into Vincenzo’s crotch, screaming like a banshee.

“You crazy fuckin’ bitch!” Gary shouted and grabbed around her shoulders, yanking her backwards. She tried to smash her drink into his head, but missed, roaring in frustration as she tried to wiggle away. Jimmy lurched forward to intervene, but he suddenly couldn’t breathe.

Wait, no, he really couldn’t breathe. Vincenzo had somehow managed to get back on his feet despite the beating his manhood had taken, dragging Jimmy into a tight headlock. Jimmy clawed desperately at his forearm,

watching helplessly as Gary pulled Rowena's hair and swung back to hit her.

His blow never landed, a pair of strong hands seizing Gary's arm and snapping it at the wrist with a sickening crunch. Gary screamed, a quick strike to his throat sending him gasping and choking onto the floor.

Jimmy couldn't even see who their rescuer was at first, the man moving too quick for him to make out and his vision getting fuzzy. Vincenzo was suddenly gone from behind him, howling in pain. Jimmy gasped, wheezing as he tried to catch his breath and holding his throat.

Rowena wrapped him up in a big hug, demanding breathlessly, "Fuck, are you okay?"

"I'm fine! Are you?" Jimmy panted, his head spinning from all the adrenaline.

"Fine! What fucking assholes!" she growled, still holding Jimmy but turning her body enough so she could kick Gary in the face.

Jimmy saw Vincenzo bleeding from a busted nose, probably broken, curled up on the floor behind him. Giant bouncers arrived to drag him and Gary away, calming the crowd. Their rescuer was casually dusting himself off, turning around to flash them a wry smirk.

Mickey Tamerlane, the Gentleman assassin fresh out of prison.

"Well, that was fun," the hitman crooned with a light chuckle. "Luchesis feelin' mighty brave today, aren't they?"

"Fuckin' assholes," Rowena muttered, cradling Jimmy protectively.

Jimmy stared dumbly at Tamerlane, mumbling, "I... wow. Uhm. That was... intense. Thank you."

Tamerlane shrugged, his dark eyes locking with Jimmy's. "You're family. It's what we do."

Face heating up, Jimmy wasn't sure what to say to that. He didn't know how he should feel about being an honorary member of the Gentlemen family; flattered, terrified? Both? He was dizzy and pulled away from

Rowena, collapsing against the bar. All the alcohol was rushing up from his stomach, and he was instantly nauseous.

Rowena fussed over him, petting his hair and cooing, “Hey, are you okay?”

Jimmy shook his head. “Yeah, no. Pretty sure I’m gonna be sick.”

Tamerlane made a face, speaking quickly to Rowena. “Get him back to the limo. Some prick has probably called the cops by now. I’ll be right behind you.”

Rowena nodded, urging, “Come on, Jimmy.”

Every step was torture, and Jimmy’s stomach sloshed violently. He gasped, shaking his head in protest of the inevitable before promptly throwing up on the sidewalk. He groaned at the smell of liquor wafting back toward him.

“I don’t think I wanna be a mafia boyfriend anymore,” he whimpered.

“Oh, sure you do,” Rowena soothed, petting his back in soothing little circles.

Jimmy puked again, coughing and hacking. “Fuuuu-uck.”

“Okay,” Rowena said sweetly. “We’ll work on it, sweetie? Okay?”

Jimmy vomited one more time. “Yup. Okay.”

“Let’s go, sweetie.”

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# Chapter Fifteen

Crawling into the back of the limo with help from Rowena and Jerry, Jimmy stretched out across the backseat. He dropped his head in Rowena's lap, swearing to himself that he would never drink again.

"Where are we going?" he asked numbly.

"Home," Rowena said, gently petting Jimmy's hair. "We're going home."

The door popped open, Tamerlane shouting, "Let's fuckin' go, Jerry!" He sat down opposite Rowena and Jimmy, helping himself to some liquor from the bar.

The limo took off, Jimmy groaning as his stomach lurched in protest.

Tamerlane grabbed an empty champagne bucket, shoving it at Jimmy as he said, "Here."

"Thanks," Jimmy mumbled, pushing his face into it. The metal felt cool against his flushed skin, swallowing back a streak of bile trying to crawl up his throat.

"You're Doc's kid."

"Who?" Jimmy looked up at the hitman, frowning.

"David Poe," Tamerlane replied, "the Doc."

"You... you know my dad?" Jimmy asked with a loud belch. He coughed, mumbling, "Sorry."

Tamerlane didn't seem to mind. "Yeah. Doc takes care of most of the guys in Westchester when they're fucked up. They're too afraid of the infirmary staff, those pricks are fuckin' butchers. But not your old man. Stubbed toe, shanked, whatever. Inmates all go to him."

"Did he ever help you?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Nah, but I did send him a lot of business while I was in," he replied with a dark chuckle.

Jimmy felt sick again.

“Doc is a good man,” Tamerlane said, his expression one of admiration.

“I’m trying to get him out,” Jimmy sighed into the bucket. “He doesn’t belong there.” *With people like you*, he thought, but didn’t dare say it out loud.

“Only innocent man in Westchester,” Tamerlane agreed.

“You think he’s innocent?”

“I know he is,” Tamerlane snorted. “Trust me, kid. I know what a killer looks like. Your old man? Ain’t got what it takes.”

“Thanks.” Jimmy found the comment strangely reassuring. If only a judge would accept Tamerlane’s instincts as admissible evidence, he thought crazily to himself. He closed his eyes, trying not to vomit any more, letting Rowena’s long fingernails dragging through his scalp soothe him.

“You okay?” Tamerlane asked, speaking to Rowena.

“I’m good,” she replied softly, as if she thought Jimmy might be asleep.

“Your bar tab says otherwise,” he drawled, clearly not believing her.

“You got a problem, Tamerlane?”

“No problem, just concerned.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

They didn’t say another word until they got back to Cold’s estate.

“Wakey wakey, drunky drunk,” Rowena chirped, gently rubbing Jimmy’s shoulder. “Let’s get you inside and get you all better.”

Jimmy whined like a petulant child. “Fuck, I am never drinking again.”

“Lies,” Rowena giggled, helping him sit up and stumble out of the limo with Tamerlane’s assistance.

They came through the front door, each with an arm around Jimmy, dragging him through the foyer and into a small sitting room. Propping him

in a chair, Rowena patted his head and said, “Just stay put, sweetie. We’re gonna go check in with Roddy, okay?”

Jimmy pressed his hands over his face, nodding slowly. The whole room was spinning, and he really did not want to be upright for much longer. “Okay.”

He heard her heels clacking away as she departed. Closing his eyes, he tried to will away the nausea as hard as he could, slumping down in the chair. Then he realized he could hear voices somewhere close by.

The Gentlemen were all here. They did not sound happy.

“You mangled one of the Luchesi boys?” A loathsome screech—Valdemar.

“Only broke his arm, should be thankful we didn’t leave their bodies in a fucking ditch.” Tamerlane—angry.

“They shouldn’t have fucking been there at all! Now that Matteo’s back, they’re all getting uppity as fuck.” Lorre, maybe. “Three couriers got jumped today, all by Luchesis.”

“We’ll handle it.” Cold, smooth and calm as always.

“We should kill them all,” Corman’s nasty voice snapped, loud and furious. “We look weak sitting around like idiots! One of those couriers was mine! They got his entire payload! Over a hundred grand!”

“I will not allow us to be dragged into a war to appease your wounded pride,” Cold replied icily.

“They assaulted your sister, your boy! What will it take for you to act?”

“Cool it, Corman,” Cold purred, so quietly that Jimmy had to strain to hear him. “I’ve already heard from Matteo. He sends his humblest apologies for the misunderstandings we’ve had today. He wants to set up a meeting, both families all together for a nice little picnic.”

“Bullshit,” rumbled Tamerlane.

“Why are they trying to disrupt the peace now?” Another voice chimed in, smart, quick. Pym. “Is it because of Dickie? Do they really think you’re gonna go down for that? What does the SSPD have on you?”

“Not enough, or they would have arrested me by now,” Cold replied smugly.

“I won’t let that happen,” Rowena’s voice rang out. “If they try to, I’ll tell them—”

“You’ll do nothing,” Cold snapped suddenly. “I’ve got it handled.”

“And Detective Duplin?” Pym pressed.

“Mr. Poe doesn’t know it, but he’s given me exactly what I need to take care of our dear detective once and for all,” Cold said with a very satisfied chuckle. “Jules just came back from seeing Geemaw earlier today, didn’t ya, Jules.”

“Sure did,” Jules rumbled. “She made cookies. The peanut butter ones with the little chocolate kisses in them.”

“Lovely,” Pym said, and Jimmy could practically hear him rolling his eyes.

“What about the Luchesis?” Corman demanded, ever restless.

“Later,” Cold said briskly, his voice getting closer, and now Jimmy could hear his footsteps. “Make sure all the couriers have armed escorts, and put extra men down at the bank. But no one makes a fucking move until after I’ve met with Matteo.”

“But—” Corman protested, but fell silent immediately, undoubtedly having received a death glare of epic proportions from Cold. “Fine.”

“Now, all of you,” Cold commanded. “Go.”

Jimmy heard a rush of footsteps as everyone began to leave, the front door slamming shut.

“Should put a bullet in that one,” Jules growled.

“Not yet,” Cold replied quietly.

“It would be his couriers that got robbed,” Rowena mused.

“I’ve got it under control,” Cold said, his voice firmer. “Come on.”

“Need a hand, Boss?” Jules offered, snickering loudly. Cold must have said yes, because now Jimmy could hear two sets of feet approaching.

“Take good care of him,” Rowena commanded. “He’s had a hell of a night.”

“Mmhmm,” Cold hummed. “Good night, Rowena.”

“And I meant what I said. If they try to arrest you, I’m not letting you go back to jail,” she said defiantly, the click-clack of her heels fading out as she stomped up the stairs before Cold could reply.

“Hell of a woman,” Jules said affectionately.

“Hell of a pain in my ass,” Cold countered.

“That, too. C’mon. Let’s get your boy.”

Jimmy opened his eyes slowly when he heard shuffling in front of him, staring up at Jules and Cold with a cheerful wave. “Hi!”

“Heya, Twig,” Jules snorted with a grin. “Have a fun time?”

“I got choked, and then I threw up all over the sidewalk. Maybe in the limo. Can’t remember.”

“Sounds like a fuckin’ fun time to me,” Jules laughed, reaching down and scooping Jimmy up into his arms as if he were a baby. “Let’s go.”

Cold led them upstairs to his bedroom, telling Jules, “I got him from here.”

“You kids have a lovely evening,” Jules rumbled softly, setting Jimmy gently down on the edge of the bed and taking his leave.

“Bye, Jules!” Jimmy called out. He grinned dopily up at Cold. “Hi.”

“Are you all right?” Cold asked once they were alone. Concern was openly written all over his face as he softly touched Jimmy’s neck.

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” Jimmy said, shaking his head. “Just... despite how much I puked, I’m still kinda drunk.”

Cold slowly began to undress Jimmy, tugging at his bow tie and undoing the first few buttons of his shirt. He raised his brow, telling him sternly,

“You’re going to take a hot bath and then probably eat something. If you puke in my bed, I am not going to be happy.”

“I won’t,” Jimmy promised, leaning heavily into Cold’s hands. “I mean, I will try really hard not to.”

Cold snorted, kneeling down to untie Jimmy’s shoes.

Jimmy stared down at him, asking hesitantly, “What did you mean... what did you mean that I gave you what you needed to get Augustus?”

“Eavesdropping, were you?” Cold began to pull Jimmy’s socks off.

“Couldn’t help it,” Jimmy said. “It’s not like you guys were speaking in code! I just wanna know... I wanna make sure you’re not going to hurt him.”

“No,” Cold said, standing back up and pulling Jimmy’s shirt right over his head instead of bothering with the rest of the buttons. “We made a deal, remember? No physical harm will befall Detective Duplin, but I am going to make sure he never bothers me or my family ever again.”

“How?” Jimmy pushed, pouting.

“Augustus Duplin is a liar, and now I have proof,” Cold said, quick fingers tugging at Jimmy’s pants and suspenders. “That’s all you need to know.”

Jimmy continued to pout, wiggling his hips as Cold finished undressing him. He began to tug at the ruby ring, grumbling when it wouldn’t come off. He stuck his finger deep in his mouth to get it wet, Cold staring at him as he sucked and licked around it. “What?”

“Nothing,” Cold said, his eyes still fixated on Jimmy’s lips.

Jimmy was able to finally pop off the ring, setting it on the bedside table with a soft clink.

“Where did you get that ring?” Cold asked, as if speaking to a startled animal.

“Mom,” Jimmy said, grunting as Cold pulled him to his feet. “My mom’s. It was in her jewelry box.”

“What if I wanted to offer you a deal?”

“Another one?” Jimmy laughed, smiling easily and brazenly resting his hands on Cold’s hips. “Don’t we have enough deals?”

“For the ring,” Cold said, gently prying Jimmy’s hands away. “What if I was to forgive your entire debt?”

Jimmy’s heart stopped on the spot, horrified. No more debt meant no more arrangement, which meant no more nights together. “Why would you do that?”

“Is it not a generous offer?” Cold asked, raising his brow.

Too softened by the alcohol to even pretend he wasn’t upset, Jimmy felt instantly stung. “And that’s it? One ring and it’s all over?”

“Didn’t realize that ring meant that much to you,” Cold replied sourly.

“You mean that much to me,” Jimmy protested passionately, on his feet and glaring at Cold even as his guts churned and his legs wobbled.

Cold looked surprised, his hands resting on Jimmy’s shoulders to steady him. His eyes narrowed, expression darkening. “Mr. Poe, I think you’re forgetting what this is... between us. This is business.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Jimmy challenged.

“Excuse me?” Cold’s fingers flinched ever so slightly, squeezing Jimmy’s shoulders a little harder.

“You are full of shit,” Jimmy repeated without hesitation.

“Mr. Poe, you’re drunk.”

“And you’re an asshole!”

“Careful now,” Cold hissed. “I’m willing to overlook your intoxicated behavior, but—”

“Why can’t you just say it?” Jimmy pleaded, his eyes beginning to tear up. “Just admit you have feelings for me! Something! Anything!”

Hand snapping around Jimmy’s neck, Cold growled furiously, “There is nothing to admit! You’re a warm body and a hot mouth. Nothing more. Take the deal.”

Jimmy scoffed and grabbed Cold’s wrist, nostrils flaring as he spat, “You’re a fucking asshole, and you’re a goddamn liar!”

Cold yanked Jimmy close, so close their breath mingled, his icy eyes burning with rage, but Jimmy refused to back down, squeezing Cold’s wrist tighter.

“I don’t know why you keep trying to hurt me, you know I don’t believe a fucking word of it. Just because you’re too much of a coward, I don’t—”

“You stupid fucking kid,” Cold seethed, giving Jimmy a rough shake. “Don’t you get it? You could have been killed tonight!”

Jimmy’s eyes widened. With the truth right there in front of him, there was no way it could be taken back. Cold did care. He cared so much. He was afraid for Jimmy.

Jaw hanging open, Jimmy realized in horror that Cold was right. The men who had assaulted him and Rowena could have done so much worse. What if Tamerlane hadn’t been there, what if the bouncers weren’t fast enough, what if...

What if they’d had a gun?

Jimmy knew he should take the new deal and run as far away as he could. He would be a target as long as he stayed with Cold. He could keep the job at the club, sing for a few months, save up his money. He could get his life straightened out, work on getting his father freed, and never see the gangster again.

But he couldn’t.

It was stupid and incredibly dangerous, but so was what he felt for Cold. The sensation was without compare, making his heart ache so sweetly whenever the man was near. He couldn’t give it up.

Cold’s hand was still wrapped tight around Jimmy’s neck, his chest heaving as he fought to keep his emotions in check. His usually stoic face was raw

and hurting; for the very first time, Jimmy saw Boss Cold look uncertain.

“But I wasn’t,” Jimmy soothed softly, alarmed to see Cold so vulnerable. He swallowed thickly. “I’m still here.”

Eyes wide, Cold’s entire body was tense, as if ready to run. “Yes, you are.”

“And I’m still yours,” Jimmy said, pressing his naked form against Cold’s fully clothed one, gently squeezing his wrist.

The words seemed to calm Cold, and he moved a hand down the small of Jimmy’s back. “Yes,” he confirmed with a breathy sigh. “You are.”

Jimmy pressed as close as he could, smiling as Cold released his neck to stroke his fingers through his hair. Jimmy rested his hands on Cold’s chest, taking a deep breath as he said, “I’m not going anywhere... we have an arrangement, right? I’m going to hold up my end of it. Are you?”

Cold had resumed his confident persona, though his eyes were softer as he looked over Jimmy’s smiling face. “I suppose this means you’re declining my offer for the ring?”

“Definitely,” Jimmy sighed.

“You’re a fool,” Cold said, his palm brushing over the top of Jimmy’s ass.

Nodding in agreement, Jimmy arched his hips. “Probably.”

Cold’s fingers slid between Jimmy’s cheeks, teasing at his hole. He let a dry fingertip breach him, smirking as Jimmy squirmed and gasped. “You’re willing to risk your life for this?”

“Everything,” Jimmy whimpered as Cold’s fingers continued to stretch and tease him.

“What?”

“I’d risk everything,” Jimmy said earnestly, his eyes locking with Cold’s.

Cold pursed his lips in concentration, as if he was debating Jimmy’s sincerity. “You really would,” he said after a moment, his gaze focused on Jimmy’s mouth.

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy said, moaning happily when he was rewarded with another teasing slide of Cold’s fingers.

“I’m not a good man, Mr. Poe,” Cold murmured. “I might just be selfish enough to let you.”

“So. Our deal?”

“Remains unchanged,” Cold replied softly, “but I still do want that ring.”

“Wait, why?”

“Let me have the ring, and I will personally oversee getting your father’s case reopened at my own expense,” Cold said, both hands now squeezing Jimmy’s cheeks and spreading them. “I’ll make sure he’s freed from prison.”

“Really?” Jimmy was stunned. He tried not to let himself get distracted, but it was hard to think straight with Cold touching him. “You would... mmm, fuck, you would do that for me?”

“For the ring,” Cold corrected smugly.

Jimmy remembered the way that Luchesi guy had looked at the ring. The initials. There had to be something he was missing, something important right in front of him, but he couldn’t focus with Cold’s probing fingers and the promise of his father’s freedom being waved in front of him.

It was from his mother’s jewelry box, and he hated to part with anything of hers. But he didn’t even know where that particular ring had come from, and if Cold meant what he had said...

“Yes,” Jimmy agreed. “If you free my father, the ring is yours.”

“Ring first,” Cold countered. “Courts will take time.”

“No, free my dad first,” Jimmy argued, gritting his teeth as Cold traced little circles around his hole. “Then... then you can have it.”

“No, I need it now,” Cold insisted, popping one of his fingers into his mouth before sliding the slick digit between Jimmy’s cheeks.

“Why... why is it so important?” Jimmy panted. “It’s not... it’s not really my mom’s, is it?”

“The less you know, the better,” Cold said firmly, sinking his finger in until Jimmy cried out. He nuzzled his mouth over Jimmy’s ear, murmuring, “When it’s time, I will tell you everything. But now, I need you to trust me.”

Jimmy rocked his hips back against Cold’s hand, mumbling, “Mmm, thought you said I shouldn’t...”

“Still true,” Cold said with a smirk.

“Fine,” Jimmy groaned, wiggling defiantly. “You can have it. Just please... help my dad.”

“I will,” Cold promised, pressing his lips against Jimmy’s forehead in a tender kiss.

Jimmy’s heart ached at the simple affection, absolutely overjoyed. He couldn’t begin to imagine the legal resources Cold had at his disposal. If anyone would be able to help his father, it would be him. Jimmy wanted to know the importance of the ring, but he trusted Cold to tell him the truth eventually. More than ever, his belief in Cold was absolute. Whatever this was between them was growing stronger with every passing day.

He knew he was falling for Cold, head over heels, and it was insane for so many reasons. He was a gangster, a thief, a murderer, but there was no one else Jimmy ever wanted to be with.

Cold didn’t show it in conventional ways, but there was no doubt in Jimmy’s mind now that he cared for him deeply.

“Now,” Cold said with a soft sigh, “let’s get you cleaned up, hmm?”

Jimmy nodded, smiling as Cold took his hand and led him into the bathroom. Cold turned on the water, blazing hot, taking Jimmy’s hands and helping him into the tub as it filled up.

Sinking down into the water, Jimmy groaned appreciatively. He blinked when he saw Cold adjusting the lights, dimming them until the bathroom was almost completely dark. “What are you doing?”

“Joining you,” was the short reply.

Jimmy’s eyes widened, and he resisted the urge to squeal. Cold was getting naked. It was too dark to see anything, but he was taking off his clothes. All of them.

Jimmy struggled to make out anything in the darkness, only able to catch a lean silhouette as Cold stripped down quickly. He turned off the water and tapped Jimmy’s shoulder, indicating for him to scoot forward. Jimmy obediently moved, grinning like a fool as Cold slipped in behind him. He leaned back, savoring the feeling of hot skin pressed against his own. He could feel Cold’s cock digging into him and grinded slowly against it.

“Easy,” Cold purred, arms wrapping around Jimmy’s waist and fingers gliding over his stomach to hold him in place. “Tonight... just relax.”

Jimmy squirmed for a moment, but relented, letting himself melt against Cold’s warm body. Cold’s hands moved, a bottle clicked, and then there was a cloth slowly scrubbing across Jimmy’s body. Cold started with Jimmy’s arms, then his hands, letting their soapy fingers tangle together.

“Feels good,” Jimmy sighed, resting his swimming head against Cold’s shoulder as he continued to bathe him.

“You smell like bile and Goldschlager,” Cold snorted, moving around Jimmy’s neck and chest. “I’ll get you a toothbrush before we go to bed.”

Jimmy barked out a laugh, defending, “Hey, it’s your sister’s fault. She’s a bad influence.”

“Mmm, yes, she can be very persuasive,” Cold agreed with a soft chuckle.

“Must run in the family,” Jimmy suggested. “I mean, you always seem to get what you want.”

“Indeed I do,” Cold drawled and leaned his cheek into Jimmy’s hair, hands moving down his lean stomach and over his hips.

Jimmy couldn’t hold back a faint groan, Cold’s touch always waking up something ravenous deep inside of him. He tried pressing Cold’s hand to where he wanted it, down between his legs, but Cold suddenly flinched.

Jimmy let go immediately, putting his hands on the side of the tub to get them out of the way. He had pushed too far and waited for a swift punishment.

“Keep that up, Mr. Poe,” Cold said in his ear, hands barely grazing the tip of Jimmy’s cock, “and I may have to tie you up.”

“Y-you know, threatening me with that may have the opposite effect of what you want...”

“Why? Would you like me to tie you up?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy said, his fingers squeezing the sides of the tub as Cold brushed over his cock. He whined, trying to thrust up into his hand. “Please... I want you to. Tie me down to the bed, a-and—”

“Not tonight,” Cold said briskly, setting the washcloth aside and rubbing his hands down Jimmy’s thighs.

“But, sir, please—”

Cold’s hand pressed against Jimmy’s neck, firm but gentle, drawling, “Mr. Poe, you’ll take what I give you or you’ll get nothing. Do you understand?”

Jimmy whined, but nodded. “Yes, sir...”

Cold kept his hand around Jimmy’s throat, reaching down with the other to slowly trace over his cock. Jimmy was already hard, trying to stay calm, trying to be good. He forced himself to relax, keeping his hips firmly planted down. With a longing sigh, he let Cold tease and pet him all he wanted, remaining boneless and pliant as he closed his eyes.

“Good boy,” Cold said, rewarding Jimmy with his long fingers curling around the shaft of his cock, squeezing lightly.

Jimmy moaned in triumph. Yes, he was good. His chest filled to the brim with pride, gasping as Cold began to slowly jerk him off.

The pressure was just right, Cold squeezing his hand a little tighter on every upstroke and massaging his thumb below the head of Jimmy’s cock. Jimmy was soon squirming, his back arching when Cold began to speed up.

Cold pressed his mouth against Jimmy's neck, lips softly touching the edge of his ear, then the corner of his jaw. He sucked possessively with a hint of teeth, but not enough to leave a mark.

Shivers raced all up and down Jimmy's spine as he leaned into it. This was the closest they had ever been, nothing separating their bodies as Jimmy writhed against him. Cold was lean, but much thicker than Jimmy was. All that muscle, God, he wished he could see it, touch it.

"Please, sir," Jimmy pleaded between gasps. "Can I please touch you?"

"No," came the firm reply, Cold's hand working over Jimmy's cock even faster, making Jimmy grunt in frustration and slap the side of the tub.

He yelped when Cold squeezed his cock so hard it hurt, whining, "I'm sorry, sir."

"Take what I give you," Cold reminded him.

"But... I just want it so much, sir," Jimmy pleaded, heat coiling up tight between his legs, ready to give way at any moment.

"No," Cold snarled, his stroking slowing to a snail's pace.

Jimmy sobbed, desperately clawing at the side of the tub. He was so close, Cold's fingers dangling him right at the edge of ecstasy.

"You're mine," Cold hissed, nipping at Jimmy's ear roughly, "but I am not yours. Don't you ever forget that."

"Yes, sir," Jimmy cried, moaning when Cold finally granted him mercy and started feverishly jerking him off. He was right there, eyes wide as he moaned, "Fuck, fuck, can I come? Please, God, let me come, sir."

"Now," Cold commanded, biting at Jimmy's neck, "come for me."

Jimmy let himself go, gasping as he came hard into Cold's palm. His hips jerked softly, thrusting a few times before he was instantly spent. Sighing pleasantly, he relaxed against Cold's body.

"Good?" Cold asked with a smile in his words.

"Mmmmph," Jimmy hummed. "Very... What about you?"

“I’m fine,” Cold assured him. “I enjoyed it very much.”

Jimmy stretched his legs in the cooling water, asking quietly, “You really are gonna help my dad?”

“I said I was going to, and I will,” Cold said simply. “Now... come on. It’s late.” He herded Jimmy out of the tub, Jimmy humming happily as Cold dried him off and wrapped him in a warm robe.

Jimmy managed to steal a quick glimpse of Cold’s lovely backside when he opened the door of the bathroom and light flooded in from the bedroom. It was over too quickly, Cold soon tucked away in a robe of his own.

He put Jimmy into bed, leaving him to change into modest pajamas while Jimmy stretched out to take up as much of the mattress as he could.

Cold snorted when he approached, drawling, “You have six seconds to move before I make you move.”

Groaning playfully, Jimmy rolled over to let Cold slide into bed beside him. The moment Cold was settled in, Jimmy cuddled back up to him, burying his head in Cold’s shoulder and throwing an arm over his chest.

Cold allowed it, his hand gently resting on Jimmy’s wrist. “Good night, Mr. Poe,” he said, eyes already closing.

“Good night... uhm...” Jimmy stuttered for a moment, not sure how to address the gangster now.

“Rod,” Cold said softly, sensing Jimmy’s hesitation. “Here in my bed, you can call me Rod.”

“Good night, Rod.”

“Night.”

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# Chapter Sixteen

Jimmy woke up to an empty bed and the ring was gone from the bedside table. His head throbbed lightly, but he felt pretty good considering all the events of last night. Grabbing Cold's pillow, he hugged it tight and inhaled his scent.

Rod. Cold had said he could call him Rod.

It was always two steps forward and one step back with Boss Cold, but Jimmy knew those steps backwards were getting smaller every day. He rolled over to grab his phone, smiling when he saw he had a new message from Cold. There was no card this morning, he noticed. That was odd.

Jimmy wondered if Cold had forgotten about it, though that seemed unlikely, as he flipped through his phone to get to the text message.

*You have work today. Be there by noon.*

*I want you back by midnight. Do not be late.*

*-RL*

Again, not a declaration of undying love, but at least he was going to see Cold tonight. Jimmy turned the camera on, feeling a little flirty. He made sure his robe was wide open, snapping a quick selfie of himself from the waist up, smiling sleepily at the camera.

He sent it to Cold with a quick message:

*Can't wait. ;)*

He didn't expect a response, but waited a few moments all the same, hopefully watching his phone. When he heard a door open, he sat up as heavy footsteps began to approach. Jimmy tensed, frowning at the unfamiliar sound. Definitely not Rowena.

The bedroom doors swung open and in walked Jules Price.

"Wow, uhm, hi," Jimmy babbled, dropping his phone to his lap.

“Good morning, Twig,” Jules rumbled with a big smile. “Me and you get to spend quality time today, Boss’ orders.”

“Me and you?” Jimmy blinked in surprise.

“Yup,” Jules replied shortly. “Boss has a big meeting tonight, wants me to keep an eye on you.”

“Then who’s keeping an eye on Cold?” Jimmy demanded with a frown.

“Ain’t you a sweet one. Trust me, he can handle himself. ‘Sides, he’s got the rest of the Gentlemen with him. He’ll be just fine.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said, sighing and pulling his robe a little tighter around himself.

“Get up, get dressed,” Jules ordered. “Got shit to do.”

Jimmy frowned, seeing his outfit from last night neatly folded down by the chaise at the foot of the bed. “I’ll need to go home. I need to change clothes, uhm, I have a check to cash...”

“What else?” Jules asked grumpily, looking annoyed. “Gotta get your hair did, too?”

“No! I just, you know, have things to do,” Jimmy pouted.

“Hurry it up. I’ll be waiting.”

Jimmy waited for Jules to leave before quickly getting dressed, then grabbed his phone and scooted downstairs to find him. The giant was in the kitchen, stealing bacon right out of the pan while Jerry yelled and cursed at him in French. Jimmy watched in awe as Jerry fearlessly threatened to bash in Jules’ head with the frying pan.

Jules was not impressed, swiping another piece and barking at Jimmy, “Eat up!”

Grinning, Jimmy quickly accepted a plate from Jerry before Jules could eat it all. He watched them bicker, giggling all the while. Jules was hardly fluent, but apparently he did know how to say some pretty vulgar things in French.

Once Jimmy had finished eating, Jules led him outside, cheerfully calling over his shoulder, "*Au revoir*, jackass!"

Jerry screamed something in French; it did not sound nice and was likely slandering Jules' mother.

Jules' car was parked out front, a slick black El Camino with gray and white flames streaking down the sides. He waved for Jimmy to get in, cranking it up as he mused, "Sorry it ain't a limo."

"No! It's great!" Jimmy laughed, running his hands over the dash. "1979, right?"

Jules smiled, toothy and big, proudly replying, "Yup. Bought it when me and Boss were in tenth grade. The first time."

"You've known Cold that long?"

"Oh, yeah." Jules rolled his shoulders, cranking the car. "We were beatin' kids up for their lunch money since kindygarten. Came from the same hood. Grew up together."

Jimmy smiled at the thought, shaking his head as Jules pulled out from the compound. He had so many questions. "So, you're like best friends?"

"Brothers," Jules corrected, driving along at cruising speeds. "We're family."

Biting his lip softly, Jimmy thought about what Tamerlane had said the other night. "I've never really had anybody like that."

"Sucks for you," Jules remarked in genuine sympathy.

"Well, there's my dad. But... I guess you know."

"Prison."

"Yeah," Jimmy sighed. "Hopefully not for long."

"Boss is workin' on it," Jules reassured him.

"He told you that?"

"Ain't nothin' he don't tell me."

“So...” Jimmy fidgeted, watching the city flash by as they drove, wondering if he should even bother asking. “Does Cold... does he really...”

*Does he really care about me?*

“Twig,” Jules cut him off, “if you have to ask me, you obviously ain’t been payin’ attention.”

“What do you mean?”

“You think he does this for every fuckin’ body?” Jules laughed heartily. “Think he asks me to babysit every twink he’s been fuckin’? Nah. He’s a hit it and quit it kinda guy. But you, well. You do somethin’ to him. Got him all stirred up.”

“I do?” Jimmy blinked, smiling shyly.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Thought you were supposed to be college educated and shit. Wake up, Twig. I knew he was fucked the moment you two met.”

“How?”

“Uh, ‘cause he didn’t break your fuckin’ hands when you grabbed him?”

Jimmy decided to take that as the compliment it was meant to be. “Why... why doesn’t he like that? Being touched, I mean. Is it because of Boris?”

Jules didn’t say anything, his eyes glued on the road.

“Look, I’m sorry for asking,” Jimmy said quickly, worried he had made a terrible mistake for digging. “I just... I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“Ain’t my place to tell you,” Jules replied.

Jimmy tried not to let his disappointment show through at being denied an explanation. “So, what do I do?”

“Whatever the fuck you’ve been doing. Just be patient. Boss needs time. Don’t take it personal. ‘Cause it ain’t about you, it’s about him. Lotta hands been on him, and all they did was hurt for a long time.”

Jimmy thought of the glimpse of scars he had seen before, so much pain packed into a small swath of flesh. *A lot of hands* made Jimmy jump to the

worst conclusion.

Did that mean Boris wasn't the only one abusing Cold? He didn't dare ask, but he had to wonder.

They pulled up to Jimmy's apartment, Jules escorting him upstairs and waiting patiently while he changed into a t-shirt and jeans. He freshened up, grabbed the check Rowena had given him, and let Jules lead him back to the car.

"What's your bank?" Jules asked, pulling back out into traffic.

"Uhm, well, I don't exactly have one," Jimmy said with a sheepish smile. "I used to bank with Strassen Springs First? But my account is super in the hole."

"So, where the hell we goin'?"

"You know Martine's Pawn?"

"You bank with Maury the Mouth?" Jules chuckled. "The loan shark?"

"Yeah," Jimmy laughed. "You know, the benefits are really good. There's no overdraft fees, free checking, never have to wait in line."

"Cute. You'll need to get set up legit at some point. Especially with you and Cold gettin' cozy, pigs will use anything they can to get to him."

"Got it," Jimmy said, nodding firmly.

They pulled up to Maury's shop, Jules squinting as he looked around. "Hey, I know this block. Used to be a jewelry store over there, right?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "My mom used to work there. It's how my family met Maury."

"It was a fuckin' front," Jules said with a laugh. "The Luchesis used to launder their money through here."

Jimmy was horrified. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, 'cause me and Boss used to run the cash. One of our first jobs together when we were kids."

“My mom was working for the mob?” Jimmy hissed in disbelief.

“Ah, I’m sure they went straight at some point,” Jules said with a shrug. “Come on, Twig.” He herded Jimmy into the shop, the bell ringing and announcing their arrival.

Maury came out of the back, calling out, “Who the fuck is that?”

“Hey, Maury! It’s me, Jimmy!”

“Yo! Is that... holy fuck, Jules fuckin’ Price.” Maury blinked when he saw Jimmy wasn’t alone. “What the fuck, I’ve had like half the fuckin’ Gentlemen in my shop all in a week.”

Jules grinned, reaching out a big mitt to shake Maury’s hand. “Big fan of your work.”

Maury snorted, grinning wryly as they shook. “Pretty sure I busted up a few of you Prices back in the day, you know.”

“Yup. Got my old man once or twice with that crowbar of yours for not payin’ up,” Jules said with a smug smirk.

“Hey. Just business, Mr. Price,” Maury said.

“Bah, shoulda hit him in the head with it,” Jules chortled. “I ain’t worried about it.”

“Dead men can’t pay,” Maury said sagely, “but men with busted kneecaps sure fuckin’ can.”

“Wise words,” Jules said with an appreciative nod.

“So.” Maury glanced between him and Jimmy. “What can I do ya for? Here to get more of your shit outta hock?”

“Not exactly. I don’t have a bank right now, so you’re the next best thing,” Jimmy said cheerfully as he endorsed the check and handed it over to Maury. “I want to start actually saving, and yeah, I do wanna try getting more of my stuff out eventually. But I want to put like five hundred in my dad’s commissary and stash the rest for now.”

“Look at you, big fancy fellow,” Maury teased, whistling when he saw the check. “I take it this means your audition went well?”

“Sings like a little canary, this one,” Jules said.

Jimmy blushed. “Hey, you know, it’s a job. I’m officially employed again. I’m doing okay!”

“Uh huh,” Maury said dryly, “and is that why I heard about you gettin’ roughed up by some Luchesi pricks?”

“You know... you know about that?”

“Come on, kid. Who the fuck you think you talkin’ to. I hear everythin’.” His eyes moved to Jules, sizing him up as he mused, “Like, hmmm, heard somebody been visiting Geemaw.”

“Who is that?” Jimmy quirked a brow. He remembered Cold and Jules talking about her last night.

“Geraldine Peters. Old gangster’s girl,” Maury said, shaking his head with a fond smile. “Used to be my girl from time to time as a matter of fact. That woman helped make a man outta me. Was a clerk for the SSPD. Did all of their filing until she was, ahem, forced to retire.”

“What happened?” Jimmy asked cautiously.

“Apparently she had a bad habit of copying police case files and other sensitive type documents,” Maury chuckled. “Meh, she’d only been doin’ it for fifty years before anybody got wise to it. Nowadays, if somebody goes to Geemaw, they’re lookin’ for information.”

Jules narrowed his eyes, scoffing, “You really do got a big ass mouth, Maury.”

“Guilty as charged,” Maury replied easily. “Just kinda funny to me that anybody would be buggin’ ol’ Geemaw for somethin’ at her age. Must be lookin’ for some real good dirt.”

Jimmy sensed a flicker of anger simmering in Jules. He wasn’t sure what Maury was trying to get at, but he could tell Jules was getting pissed.

“So, Jules tells me the Luchesis used to run the jewelry store?” Jimmy said, quickly trying to change the subject.

“A long time ago,” Maury said with a shrug. “Used to wash their cash over there. But it was legit when Eliza worked there if that’s what you’re wondering about. I mean, gangsters still went there to get their bling fixed up and shit. But it was a straight joint until it closed.”

Jules’ phone buzzed. He eyed Jimmy, saying, “I gotta take this. Be ready to go in five, Twig.” He looked at Maury, shaking his hand again as he grumbled, “Don’t be tellin’ our boy here any stories now.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Maury replied with a firm smile.

As soon as Jules stepped outside to answer his phone, Jimmy whirled around to stare at Maury. “Hey! What was that about?”

Smacking Jimmy upside the back of the head, Maury snapped, “What the fuck have you gotten yourself into! Fightin’ with Luchesis, sniffin’ around Geemaw!”

“What’s the big deal with this lady?” Jimmy protested, rubbing his head.

“She’s the one you go to when you’re trying to dig up dirt on fuckin’ cops,” Maury explained. “Whatever Cold is up to, it ain’t good, kid. I love you like my own, and you need to get the fuck out.”

Jimmy immediately recalled what Cold said about having proof about Augustus being a liar, and his stomach turned.

“Are you hearing me?” Maury snapped.

Jimmy took a deep breath, saying firmly, “I’m okay. I know what I’m doing.”

“No, you fucking don’t.”

“I swear, it’s okay! That’s why I have Jules with me! I’m—”

“Heart! Dick! Remember? Listen to yourself, kid. This was just supposed to be a deal—”

“It’s not,” Jimmy said, throwing his hands up in frustration. “I don’t know what it is, but it’s... it’s something else now. Okay? Cold cares about me, and I care about him. Look, he’s gonna help me get my dad out, all right?”

“And what did that cost you?” Maury demanded.

Jimmy didn’t want to answer, pouting defiantly. “He’s gonna help. That’s all that matters.”

“Be careful, kid,” Maury said, a frown curling his long lips. “Stayin’ alive matters a lot, too.”

“I know it does,” Jimmy smiled gently, “and I don’t plan on anything happening to me.”

“What you plan and what actually fuckin’ happens is rarely the same thing, kid,” Maury laughed bitterly.

Jimmy stuck out his tongue. “Yeah, yeah. Look, will you please put that money in my dad’s account for me?”

“You got it. And I’ll shove the rest in a mattress for you. Just don’t make me spend it on a funeral, you fuckin’ hear?”

“Is it really... that bad?”

Maury gave him an incredulous stare. “Kid. It’s really not good. Cops are all nervous with the Luchesis back in town, the Gentlemen are all over the place trying to maintain control. Cold is makin’ sure no one starts a war, but if the Luchesis keep pokin’ at him... they’re gonna get one.”

Jimmy frowned softly, his concern immediately going out for Cold.

*Rod*, he thought to himself. He was worried about Rod.

“Take care of yourself,” Maury said, glancing toward the door. “Jules’ waitin’ on you.”

Jimmy looked back to see a very impatient-looking Jules waving at him. “Okay, I’m going, and yes, I promise I will be super careful,” he reassured his friend. “I will not get caught up in any gang wars.”

“I’ll remember you said that,” Maury snorted. “See ya round, kid.”

Jimmy said farewell and rejoined Jules at the car. Jules didn't say much, turning up the radio as they drove. He made a few stops, always instructing Jimmy to stay put while he went inside.

A barber shop, law office, liquor store, gas station.

Jimmy spent his time flipping through his phone, looking up music. He was trying to get some inspiration for what he might perform for Cold's birthday.

By the time Jules returned from the last errand, it was already close to noon. "Time to get to work, Twig."

Jimmy nodded, staring out the window as they drove to the club. He was surprised to see a flock of giant suited men as they pulled up, a few of which he recognized from the hotel. Jules guided Jimmy inside, Dario already up on stage by his piano waiting for him.

Jimmy blushed all over when he remembered all the things he had done on that piano.

"Hey!" Dario greeted cheerfully, waving, blissfully ignorant of what debauchery had occurred right where he was sitting. He frowned when he saw Jules following Jimmy and quirked his brows at all the suits in tow. "What's going on?"

"Everything's fine," Jules rumbled, sitting down at a table close to the stage. The other men scattered around the club, all taking various defensive positions. "Totally fine."

"Uh, no," Dario said with a frown. "The last time I saw this many goons? You were getting somebody ready for a wooden onesie. Is it the Luchesis?"

"Hearin' things?" Jules asked casually, still not answering Dario's question.

"Just that the Luchesis are back, wanting to make a move against Cold," Dario replied, lightly tapping one of the piano's keys. "They figure he's gonna go down for killing Dickie, and the Gentlemen won't be able to hang on without him."

"Huh," was all Jules said. "That so?"

Dario looked annoyed at not having any of his information confirmed, sighing and looking over at Jimmy. “Rowena tells me we have a big ol’ birthday party to get ready for?”

“Yes!” Jimmy replied, clapping his hands together. “I’m gonna be singing with you guys like twice a week now, so I know I have a ton to learn—”

“Hey, hey,” Dario reassured him, “you’ll be fine. You’re a super quick study, and I can totally send you some of the music to work on at home.” He cracked his knuckles, racing his fingers over the keys. “What I wanna hear about now is what you’re planning on doing to make Cold’s birthday an event to remember.”

“Well,” Jimmy grinned, scratching the back of his head. “Actually, I do maybe have a few ideas.”

“Cool! C’mon, Buckaroo. Let’s see what you got cookin”.

The next few hours were spent rehearsing Jimmy’s songs that he had picked out for the party. A few Dario made faces at and nixed immediately, but one or two he was excited about reworking for the show.

They had almost completed the set list, and both Dario and Jimmy were pretty proud of the final number they had come up with, leaving Dario grinning from ear to ear as they finished.

“Oh, this is gonna be so good.”

Even Jules seemed to dig it, chuckling, “Can’t wait to see the Boss’ face. I still say you should pop out of a big cake, though.”

“No cake,” Dario groaned. “That’s for like, bachelor parties and cheesy strip clubs. This is gonna be classy, but you know, with some teeth.”

Jimmy beamed proudly, hoping Cold was going to enjoy it. They had worked so hard, and he was excited for Friday to get here. “Okay. So, you wanna run through it one more time?”

“From the top,” Dario agreed, fingers running over the keys of his piano again.

Jules' phone went off, and he lumbered to his feet as he answered. "Talk." He looked up at the stage, frowning as he listened. He didn't seem to like what the person on the other line had to say. "You gotta be fuckin' kiddin' me."

Jimmy quirked a brow, asking carefully, "Everything okay, Jules?"

"You two," Jules barked, pointing at him and Dario, "stay put until I get back."

Jimmy frowned, looking back worriedly at Dario.

"Hey! What's going on?" Dario called to Jules.

"Stay the fuck put, I said!" he snapped, heading toward the front of the club. Two of the suited men went with him, guns already drawn.

Jimmy backed toward the piano, his heart thumping with dread. "What the crap is going on?"

"I have no idea," Dario said, gulping audibly. He was up on his feet, worry creasing his brow. "But I have a bad feeling about this."

Two gunshots rang out, making Jimmy jump. "Oh, fuck! What the fuck!"

The rest of the suited men bolted to the front of the club, more shots firing.

"Okay, time to go!" Dario grabbed Jimmy's arm and started dragging him toward the back of the stage as more shots went off.

"But Jules said—!"

"Who do you think is probably being shot at right now?" Dario hissed, wincing at another round of gunfire. "We've gotta get the fuck out of here! Now!"

"Who is that out there!" Jimmy demanded.

"Do you really wanna stick around to find out? Obviously they're very bad people that are way more bad than the bad people we work for! Let's fuckin' go!"

Jimmy found himself being shoved through the curtains, Dario pushing him toward a narrow hallway. It felt like his heart was climbing up into the back of his throat, and he stumbled as he tried to hurry to the door.

He hoped Jules was okay, and he wished like hell that Cold was here.

“This way,” Dario said. “We’ll go out through the back, and my car is parked right there.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said, trying to focus on Dario’s voice and keep his anxiety at bay. They were almost there. The door was right there.

Jimmy reached for the knob, but the door swung open before he could grab it. He yelped, backing away when he saw Vincenzo Luchesi leering at him.

“Just who I was lookin’ for,” Vincenzo sneered, pointing his gun right at Jimmy. His nose was bandaged and both of his eyes were bruised from his scuffle with Tamerlane. He did not look happy to see Jimmy at all.

“Oh, God,” Jimmy gasped, his chest beginning to tighten, staring down the barrel of Vincenzo’s gun. He felt Dario’s hands grab his shoulders, leaning against him as he panted fearfully.

“Where’s the ring?” Vincenzo demanded.

“The r-ring?” Jimmy was flabbergasted. The hell was the big deal with that stupid ring? He shook his head, stuttering, “I-I don’t have it! I gave it to Cold!”

“Meh,” Vincenzo shrugged. “Ain’t that a fuckin’ shame. Guess we don’t need you then, huh?”

Jimmy’s eyes widened, terror making his blood freeze and his breath catch. “Wait. What?”

The gun fired.

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# Chapter Seventeen

“Get down!” Dario screamed, grabbing Jimmy and slamming him to the floor.

Jimmy felt white-hot pain burning his arm and grunted when Dario landed right on top of him. With his ears ringing from the gunshot being in such close proximity, the world spun around him in a violent blur.

There was another shot, and Jimmy thought that was it. Vincenzo had killed him. He could feel something hot oozing down his neck. He could smell blood. He thought it was his own and grit his teeth together, squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

He thought of Cold in those moments; his velvety voice purring in his ear, his rare smile that made Jimmy’s heart skip a beat, and those icy blue eyes that melted his very soul. He wished Cold was here. He wanted to see him one last time.

No, not Cold.

*Rod*.

Another shot nearly shattered Jimmy’s eardrums for how close it was, and there was a loud thump in front of him. His eyes fluttered open to see Vincenzo Luchesi spread out on the floor next to him. There was blood pouring out of his mouth, and his eyes were lifeless pools.

He was dead.

“Oh, Christ,” Jimmy gasped.

Dario shouted, rolling off Jimmy as they both scrambled to back away from the corpse. Jimmy felt sick, trying to move, trying to get up.

Jules stood over them, his gun in hand, face terribly concerned. He reached for Jimmy, and he was saying something. He’d shot Vincenzo. He killed him.

Holy shit, Jules killed him.

Jimmy couldn’t breathe, and he had no idea whose blood was all over him. It couldn’t all be his own. He could hear Dario and Jules talking, but they seemed so far away. He couldn’t make much out over the ringing in his ears anyway.

Jules grabbed his shoulder to help him up, but Jimmy’s legs wouldn’t work. They were too wobbly, too weak, and he panted erratically as he pushed Jules’ hands away. He couldn’t believe how much blood there was. His eyes rolled back in his head and then he was swallowed up by darkness.

The faint beeping of medical monitors greeted Jimmy when he woke up with a soft groan. His right arm felt tingly and sore, his head heavy with the weight of drugs. He tried to move, but his wrist was trapped by something.

Blinking open his eyes, he stared blearily down to find he was handcuffed to the bed rail. He was in a hospital, Strassen Springs General if he had to guess. His right upper arm was bandaged tight, and he was wearing one of those ridiculous gowns that didn’t allow for a shred of dignity when the wearer was not lying down. At least all the blood was gone now.

“Hey,” croaked a soft voice. “Welcome back to the world of the living.”

Jimmy turned to see that the second bed in the room was occupied by Dario. “Hey!”

“You’ve been out for like an hour,” Dario said, frowning. “They doped you up pretty good.”

Jimmy tugged forlornly at the handcuff. “What the crap happened? It’s all... fuzzy.”

“Luchesis,” Dario replied with a light groan. “Hit the club. They attacked two other Gentleman properties. All at the same time.”

“Is Cold okay?” Jimmy asked immediately.

“Yeah, come on,” Dario snorted. “He’s fine. I’m fine, too. Thanks for asking.”

“You... you saved me,” Jimmy said with sudden clarity, gazing adoringly at his friend. “You pushed me out of the way.”

“Yeah,” Dario said with a wry smile. “Bullet still grazed you, but don’t worry. I caught it with my shoulder.”

“Shit.” Jimmy could see that Dario’s shoulder was bandaged and his arm was in a sling.

“Shit is right,” Dario scoffed. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Thank you,” Jimmy said with a warm smile.

“Hey, let’s try not to make it a habit, okay?” Dario laughed weakly.

“What’s with the cuffs?” Jimmy noticed Dario was also locked to his bed.

“That’s the SSPD for you.”

“Are you serious?” Jimmy blinked, rattling the cuff in protest. “We didn’t do anything wrong. We’re victims, not suspects!”

“Witnesses,” Dario corrected. “Three people are dead, more wounded.”

Jimmy swallowed thickly, a flash of Vincenzo’s lifeless eyes making his stomach churn uncomfortably. “The ring. He was asking about the ring.”

“What ring?” Dario asked before throwing up his uninjured arm. “Nope, wait, never mind! I don’t want to fuckin’ know!”

Jimmy heard the discharge of radio static, glancing up at a large window that looked out into the hallway. The blinds were cracked and he caught a glimpse of someone in uniform. “Cops?”

“Yup. Been waiting for you to wake up to take our statements,” Dario said with a long sigh. “Best thing to do? You didn’t see anything, you don’t know anything. Got it?”

“Got it,” he sighed, closing his eyes and letting his head drop back down against the pillow.

There was a sudden flurry of activity outside in the hallway, raised voices and cursing. Jimmy looked over to see the officer trying to keep someone back, sternly saying, “Sir, you need to wait out here.”

“Fuck you, dickless,” a familiar gruff voice raged. “I’m Jimmy Poe’s motherfuckin’ healthcare power of attorney! I got every right to be here! Get the fuck outta my way!”

Jimmy’s face lit up in an instant. Maury!

The door swung open so hard it slammed against the wall. Maury stomped into the room, leering at Jimmy. “Can you believe that prick? Tryin’ to keep me outta here. Dumbass don’t know who he’s fuckin’ with!”

The officer did not look pleased, but made no more effort to stop Maury from coming in.

“Hey, Maury,” Jimmy greeted, giving a little wave with his good arm.

“Are you all right, kid? They treatin’ you okay?” Maury hurried over to the side of his bed, his eyes as big as saucers and wet with tears when he saw the bandage. “Fuck.”

Jimmy was touched. He’d never seen Maury look so concerned. “I’m fine! It’s just a scratch, I swear!”

“Are ya sure?”

“Yes, I promise.”

Maury reared back and smacked Jimmy on the top of the head, snapping, “You dumb fuckin’ kid! I fuckin’ told you to be careful! I fuckin’ told you __”

“Owww! What the hell, Maury!” Jimmy whined, rubbing his head and pouting.

“Jesus!” Dario groaned in sympathy. “Give Jimmy a damn break!”

“Hey! Fuck you!” Maury snarled, whirling around to glare at Dario. “I know I don’t know ya’s, but yeah, fuck you!”

“That’s Dario,” Jimmy sighed. “He tried to help—”

“Nice to meet you, Dario! Now, kindly fuck off, and lemme tend to my business!” Maury growled, turning back to smack Jimmy again. “Stupid motherfuckin’ mentally irregular fuckwad!”

“Ow! Damn, Maury!”

“Dumbass!” Maury seethed. “I fuckin’ told you to stay outta trouble!” A few tears slid down his cheeks, his long lips twisting into an anguished grimace, as he pulled Jimmy against his chest. “I told ya’s... fuck.”

Jimmy clung to Maury, trying not to cry. The danger of this life he had chosen was real. It was here, inescapable, and it had almost killed him. If Dario hadn’t moved when he did, Maury really would have been using that money for a funeral.

“Don’t you ever fuckin’ scare me like that again,” Maury said firmly, kissing Jimmy’s forehead. “I’m gonna have a fuckin’ talkin’ to with motherfuckin’ Cold about keepin’ your scrawny ass safe.”

Smiling tearfully up at Maury, Jimmy laughed softly. He had no doubt in his mind that his friend would.

“I’m worried, kiddo.” Maury stroked Jimmy’s hair, affectionately patting his cheek as he sighed, “Things ain’t good out there. Streets is talkin’, and they are gonna be bloody.”

“Did I really get stuck in the middle of a gang war?”

Maury snorted, shaking his head. “It’s a fuckin’ mess, that’s for sure. And listen, do you remember that big ol’ shiny ruby ring? The one in your mom’s jewelry box? I heard some crazy shit today, and I’m startin’ to think that ring used to belong to—”

“Knock, knock,” a voice at the door said, with knuckles rapping at the frame. “Nice to see everybody is awake now.”

Jimmy’s stomach did another violent round of churning when he saw it was Detective Augustus Duplin standing there.

“Oh, just fuckin’ fabulous,” Maury groaned, rolling his eyes. “The fuck do you want?”

“I need to talk to these young men about the shooting at La Belle earlier today,” Augustus said in a professional, firm tone.

Jimmy hated that voice, Augustus’ ‘cop voice.’ “We didn’t see anything.”

Augustus stepped closer, his hands firmly planted on his hips. “I find that pretty hard to believe, considering you were covered in Vincenzo Luchesi’s blood. A DNA test will confirm it, but your clothes have already been taken as evidence.”

All Jimmy could see was splashes of red, his heart thumping heavily in his chest. “He shot me,” he said quietly. “I saw the blood... I just... passed out.”

“Did you see who shot Mr. Luchesi?” Augustus asked directly.

Jules’ scowling face appeared in his mind’s eye. “I don’t... I can’t be s-sure. No clue.”

“I think we both know you’re lying,” Augustus pressed relentlessly. “Who shot Vincenzo Luchesi?”

“Uhhh...” Jimmy’s cheeks flushed with warmth, melting beneath Augustus’ piercing glare. “Somebody with... a gun?”

“Jimmy, you need to help us out here. Tell me who killed Vincenzo Luchesi.”

“He didn’t see nothin’,” Maury growled, resting a supportive hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. “You fuckin’ ugly *and* deaf?”

Augustus rolled his eyes.

“What’s the matter? Can’t threaten Jimmy with outin’ him as a snitch no more, so now you’re trying to play good cop again? Go get fucked on a traffic cone.”

“What he said,” Dario agreed.

“Jimmy, listen to me,” Augustus said earnestly, his cop persona weakened for a moment by obvious concern. “I don’t know why, but the Luchesis are very interested in you. Someone broke into your apartment earlier today. Trashed it. Like they were looking for something.”

Jimmy’s eyes almost popped out of his head. “O-oh, isn’t that... weird.”

“Let me help you,” Augustus said gently. “Same for you, Mr. Romero. We can make a deal that will benefit everyone.”

“A deal?” Jimmy repeated.

“Yes. Help us, tell me who killed Vincenzo. Tell me what the Luchesis are looking for. Let’s make a deal, Jimmy.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Jimmy took a deep breath and lifted his chin defiantly. “Already got one of those, thank you.”

Augustus looked confused for a moment before saying slowly, “If you don’t cooperate, you’re not going to leave me any choice. Either of you. I’m trying to give you a chance to do the right thing here.”

“Too bad we can’t help you,” Dario said with a shrug. “We didn’t see anything.”

“Nope,” Jimmy agreed, his mind made up. He would not betray Cold, especially not to Augustus. “Nothing.”

Augustus started to argue again, but there was more excitement outside that drew his attention. The officer who was posted at the door was backing away, obviously terrified and frantic.

“You... you can’t go in there,” the officer protested weakly.

“Then try to stop me,” growled a voice of velvet that made Jimmy shiver down in his bones.

Boss Cold himself was here, several of the Gentlemen right behind him.

Lorre, Valdemar, and Thirdsies.

Cold stormed right by the officer, pushing the door open, eyes wild and teeth bared, searching for Jimmy. When their eyes met, Jimmy could feel the electricity crackling in the air like bolts of lightning striking the earth.

“Rod,” Jimmy caught himself whispering, sitting up straighter in bed. There was an honest moment back there where he hadn’t thought he was ever going to see Cold again, overjoyed now that he had been so very wrong.

“The man himself,” Augustus sneered with open contempt. “I’m in the middle of taking a statement, you need to leave.”

Cold's face softened for the briefest of moments as he gazed at Jimmy, relief washing over him with a slow exhale. His body relaxed, and he strolled leisurely over to Jimmy.

"Hey! Everyone else might be afraid of you, but I'm not," Augustus barked, tracking Cold's every movement.

Cold sat down on the edge of the hospital bed, gloved hands reaching to cradle Jimmy's face. He was completely ignoring the other occupants of the room, Augustus in particular. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," Jimmy said, smiling warmly as his hands came up to rest over Cold's.

Cold leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to Jimmy's forehead. The storm that was brewing in his eyes was calmer now, a loving smile playing over his lips.

Jimmy wished like hell they were alone. All he could think about was having those wicked lips kissing his and those gloved hands curling around various parts of his anatomy. Cold had been worried about him, he could tell, and having him being so openly affectionate made his heart ache with want.

"Very touching and all, but right now you're interfering with an ongoing police investigation," Augustus snapped impatiently.

Whatever warmth had resided in Cold's expression vacated immediately, his eyes narrowing as he turned to finally address Augustus. "Detective Duplin," he drawled, "I think it's time for you to leave."

Augustus scoffed in disgust, biting back, "I'm not going anywhere."

Cold rose slowly, and Jimmy could see him visibly shudder with rage despite his cool expression.

Leaning back in the bed, Jimmy anxiously curled his fingers in the sheets. It was like watching two titans circling a gladiatorial arena, waiting to see who would draw first blood.

"Oh, but you are," Cold assured him icily, stepping smoothly into Augustus' space. "Right now."

“You smug, arrogant son of—”

“You’re leaving or I’m going to call my good friends down at Strassen Springs News and tell them all about how you’ve been harassing two innocent shooting victims,” Cold purred, his eyes never leaving Augustus’.

“That’s pretty cheap, even for you,” Augustus spat disgustedly.

“Mmm, no, cheap would be telling you that I think the apartments over at Baker’s Glen are just lovely,” Cold taunted, delighted when Augustus’ eyes widened.

“Did you... did you just threaten my daughter?” Augustus snarled furiously, his hand starting to go to his gun at his hip.

“Wait. Anna is here?” Jimmy asked stupidly. Baker’s Glen was a local apartment complex in Strassen Springs. Cold’s vague threat aside, Jimmy was stunned that his former best friend was back in the city, and he’d had no idea.

Then again, Jimmy reasoned sadly, they hadn’t spoken in several years.

“You are a fucking bastard,” Augustus continued to rage. He didn’t seem to have heard Jimmy, his hand hovering over his weapon as he glared at Cold. “You are going to regret this.”

“All I did was make a comment about a popular apartment community,” Cold said with a charming smirk. “You’re the one about to draw your gun on an unarmed man with multiple witnesses.”

Augustus froze, seeming to remember that the blinds were cracked open and the Gentlemen were all watching them. Thirdsies had his face pressed against the glass, peering in. He grinned and waved when Augustus looked his way. Lorre flipped him off.

Augustus dropped his hand to his side, fingers curling into a tight fist. “This isn’t over,” he promised.

“Far from it,” Cold agreed with a nasty smirk.

“I’d be well within my right to hold them both in police custody as witnesses,” Augustus snapped. “I could keep them. Indefinitely.”

“Actually,” Jimmy piped up, eyes narrowing, “if you’re referring to the United States Code Title 18, section 3144? The, uh, material witness statute? Sorry. That doesn’t apply here, Augustus. First of all, since Dario and I didn’t see anything, our testimony hardly makes us material to the case. Secondly? You can only enforce police custody once you’ve proven that you have reason to believe you can’t ensure a witness’ presence in court by subpoena. Both Dario and I live here in the city, we’re both gainfully employed, and we’ve given you no indication that we would flee. You’d never get a judge to believe that either of us are a flight risk.”

Augustus’ jaw dropped.

Cold had never looked so proud.

“Trying to hold us would be unconstitutional,” Jimmy went on, holding his head up high. “Something else I’m sure the nice people down at Strassen Springs News would love to hear all about.”

“Fuckin’ suck it!” Maury cheered.

Augustus clicked his teeth together, glowering as he snapped, “Fine. This is how you wanna be, fine. You’ve made your bed, now you’re gonna have to sleep in it.”

“Oh, trust me,” Cold said maliciously, “he sleeps in my bed just fine.”

Augustus’ hand twitched as if he was going to reach for his gun again. He turned around, stalking wordlessly toward the door.

“Have a lovely afternoon, Detective,” Cold chuckled, watching Augustus storm off. His eyes moved back to Jimmy. “That... was impressive.”

“Thanks,” Jimmy said shyly, certain that his head was about to pop off from the massive jolt to his ego.

Cold moved back to the bedside, gently touching Jimmy’s cheek. “You continue to surprise me, Mr. Poe.”

Jimmy blushed, leaning into Cold’s palm.

“Hey, you,” Maury sniped. “Mister Cold, sir?”

Cold frowned, turning his head to look at Maury.

“I say ‘sir’ outta the respect you’re due. But uh, yous and I gotta have a little chat,” Maury said, his bushy brows scrunching up.

“Do we now?” Cold seemed amused.

“Yeah, we sure fuckin’ do,” Maury said, about to open that big mouth of his and certainly get himself into a whole heap of trouble.

But then there was yet another flurry of activity out in the hall, the Gentlemen all cheerfully greeting a rushing blur of heels and glitter, a female voice snapping, “Where the fuck is he?”

Rowena Legrand was at the door now, her face red from crying, hands over her heart as she squealed, “Oh, my God! I was so worried! I heard you had been shot, and, and, my fuckin’ God! Look at you, you poor thing!”

Jimmy sighed, smiling gently. “I’m okay, really! Just a scratch!”

Rowena came bounding across the room, sniffling, “I was worried fuckin’ sick!”

“Seriously, I’m fine!” Jimmy insisted, blinking in surprise as Rowena went right by him and crawled into bed beside Dario.

No one looked more stunned than Dario himself, wrapping his good arm around Rowena’s shoulders, soothing, “Hey, come on now. I’m all right.”

“You saved Jimmy’s life,” Rowena cooed, running her long nails through Dario’s hair. “You’re a hero, Dary.”

“Big damn hero,” Dario agreed, grinning dopily. He looked as if he had died and gone to heaven, save for knowing Cold was right there glaring at him.

Cold did not look particularly pleased with his sister fawning all over Dario, but said nothing to them. He looked back to Jimmy, asking, “Ready to go home?”

“Home? You mean your house?” Jimmy clarified.

“I mean exactly what I said,” Cold said simply. “In light of recent circumstances, your apartment is not safe. For the foreseeable future, you’ll

be staying with me." He tilted his head curiously. "Unless you have a problem with that?"

"Uh, no," Jimmy squeaked, clearing his throat as he added, "No problem at all."

"Hey, I got a big fuckin' problem," Maury suddenly interjected. "Jimmy got fuckin' shot at while you was supposably watchin' out for him, in case you already forgot."

Cold's pleasant expression faltered, and he wrinkled his nose slightly at Maury's objection. "Mr. Martine, is it? I'll let you know when your opinion is needed. In the meantime—"

"Listen here, big, tall, and ugly," Maury growled, shaking a thick digit at him. "You might be the giant ol' king shit of Strassen Springs, but Jimmy is like my own fuckin' kid."

Cold looked over Maury with equal parts fondness and annoyance, as if he was the beloved family pet that had become incontinent in his advancing years and had just had yet another accident.

"If anything happens to him, ain't enough Juleses or Tamerlanes or whoever the fuck else to save you from the likes of me," Maury went on, his stout frame shaking and sweating. "I'll jam my crowbar so far up your ass, you'll be able to open your mouth and pop nails outta walls, you hear me?"

"While that's a very colorful picture of violence that you're painting, I'm __"

"I ain't done yet. If your goons do manage to knock me off before I get t'you? I'll haunt your fuckin' ass. Ain't gonna be none of that cute and fuzzy Patrick Swayze singing shit about Henry's wives neither."

The corner of Cold's mouth twitched, and Jimmy was honestly afraid for his friend.

"I will wave my stubby dick in your fuckin' face for the rest of your days until you wanna blow your fuckin' brains out. You open your eyes, all you're gonna see is my wedding tackle waggin' at you," Maury promised him. "So you'd better take care of Jimmy. You better not let him get hurt

again, you fuckin' smug prick or else it's gonna be all wrinkly fuckin' scrotes for you forever." He swallowed audibly, adding quietly, "Sir."

Jimmy looked nervously over at Dario and Rowena who both looked as panicked as he did, before he glanced back quickly to Cold. He couldn't read the gangster's face, unsure of how exactly he was going to react to Maury's outburst.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Cold said after a long pause, extending his hand toward Maury.

Maury was more relieved than anyone else, exhaling sharply as he shook Cold's hand. He was instantly blustered by his apparent victory, smacking his lips together and laughing, "Yeah, you just remember. Crowbar. Ass. Wrinkly balls."

"Don't think I could forget if I tried," Cold drawled, glancing back at Jimmy with a small smirk. "Mr. Poe, you have the most charming friends."

Jimmy beamed sweetly, agreeing wholeheartedly. "Yeah, I sure do."

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# Chapter Eighteen

Cold was able to persuade the hospital to release Jimmy into his care, although he made a point to remove the handcuffs himself instead of letting the policeman unlock them with the key.

Showing off doubtlessly, but Jimmy loved it.

Maury grumbled some more, gave Jimmy a farewell hug and glared at Cold. He narrowed his eyes, defiantly pointing at his crotch and saying, “Remember. Wrinkly balls for fuckin’ ever,” as his departing words.

Rowena opted to stay in the hospital with Dario since he needed a surgical consult for his shoulder, cheerfully bidding adieu to her brother and Jimmy.

Cold had one of the Gentlemen bring him a change of clothes for the ride home, a set of oversized sweats. They were warm and clean, and Jimmy was grateful to get out of the hospital garb. He dozed off in the gangster’s lap in the back of the limo en route. He was exhausted from the adventures of the day, happy to be in Cold’s embrace.

He was safe there.

Once they arrived back at his estate, Cold personally carried Jimmy upstairs. Jimmy held onto his neck, thankful for the new level of closeness he was being allowed, burying his face into Cold’s shoulder with a soft sigh. All of his troubles melted away in this man’s arms.

Cold got Jimmy into bed, checking the bandage with a gentle touch. “Does it hurt?”

“Burns mostly,” Jimmy answered. “It’s okay.”

“I’m proud of you,” Cold said with a sincere smile that made Jimmy’s insides turn to jelly. “You held your own with Duplin and watching you put him in his place like that was magnificent.”

“Thank you,” Jimmy said with a bashful smile.

“You will make a very good lawyer one day.”

“I don’t know about that, I’m a terrible liar,” Jimmy chuckled. “It wasn’t easy lying to Augustus. I told him I didn’t see anything, and that was... crap. Almost impossible to get out.”

“Lying to police officers?” Cold looked shocked, teasing. “Why, Mr. Poe, picking up all of these criminal habits.”

“Just so you know, in the future? I will only be taking on innocent clientele to avoid the whole lying to police stuff.”

“Mmm, won’t have much business then, I’m afraid,” Cold said with an affectionate smirk. “I don’t know many innocent men.”

“Yeah, I guess not,” Jimmy said quietly, trying to ignore the memories of Jules standing over him with a gun. The blood, there was so much blood, Vincenzo’s dead eyes staring at him but not seeing. Not seeing anything ever again.

“What’s wrong?” Cold’s demeanor shifted to one of concern.

“I just... I was thinking,” Jimmy stammered, his breathing starting to quicken. “That’s the second time I’ve seen... someone killed. I’m...”

The room was starting to spin, his vision getting dark. He tried to tell himself that there was no blood here, there was no knife, no gun. He was panting, his fingers clenching and unclenching against the sheets. He couldn’t keep the panic from rising up and flooding his lungs, squeezing his chest until he couldn’t breathe.

“Take a breath. Tell me what you need,” Cold said, lying down beside Jimmy and pulling him into his arms.

“Just you,” Jimmy replied, trying to shake off the darkness and melting against Cold like a bowl of ice cream on a hot summer day. He pressed as close as he could, invading every inch of space between them until he was practically glued to him. “I just... need you.”

“Keep breathing,” Cold ordered and continued to hold Jimmy tight, rubbing his back and shoulders, not letting up for a moment.

Concentrating on that perfectly smooth voice, Jimmy felt his pulse climb down out of heart attack territory. It was amazing how quickly Cold could

pull him out of the darkness, and he sighed contently at the tender affection.

“Better?” Cold soothed gently after a few long beats of silence, resting his cheek against Jimmy’s hair.

“Yes,” Jimmy sighed, the anxiety finally receding.

“Jules said he told you and Dario to stay back,” Cold said firmly, his tone carrying a hint of reprimand.

“He did,” Jimmy said, “but then we heard the shots. I guess... we just got scared. Dario thought we could get to his car.”

Cold’s hand pressed tightly at the small of Jimmy’s back, chastising, “Foolish.”

“I know,” Jimmy confessed. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Obviously.”

“Where’s Jules now?” Jimmy asked. “He... he saved me, too. Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. Keeping a low profile,” Cold replied, his fingers gently sliding along Jimmy’s spine. “At least until the heat dies down.”

“Did they really trash my place?”

“The Luchesis? Yes. Probably won’t be able to tell much difference, all things considered.”

“Why, because my apartment is already so shitty?” Jimmy snorted, grateful for the splash of levity. “Very funny.”

Cold smirked, pleased with himself at his little joke.

“So. I’m really going to be staying here. With you?” Jimmy peered curiously at Cold, hoping he didn’t sound as excited as he felt. “For how long?”

“Until it’s safe,” Cold said, his eyes lingering on Jimmy’s lips.

“Worried about me?”

“You still have quite a debt to work off,” Cold deflected smoothly.

“Mmmm, I really do,” Jimmy said dryly. He knew Cold was being facetious, but it would be so nice to actually hear one genuine statement of endearment.

“I’ll have your things brought over. Anything in particular you need?”

“My mom’s jewelry,” Jimmy replied immediately. Cold quirked a brow at that so he clarified, “Maybe I don’t need it exactly, but... I want it here. And there’s a shoebox under my bed? Full of pictures. That, too. Please.”

“Done.”

“It’s that ring, isn’t it? They were looking for the ring. Vincenzo saw me wearing it at the club. He asked me about it... before, you know, before he tried to shoot me.”

Cold’s face hardened. “What of it?”

“You said you’d tell me,” Jimmy reminded him, pouting. He trusted Cold, he did, but he had to know what was going on.

Cold said nothing.

Jimmy reached up, resting his hand on Cold’s cheek, trying to make him look back at him. “Rod?”

Cold’s eyes flickered back when Jimmy said his name, grabbing his wrist and deftly pinning it above his head.

Jimmy gasped, surprised by the spike of lust that rushed through him. He bit his lip, gazing hungrily up at Cold.

Shifting his body on top of Jimmy’s, Cold was mindful of his injured arm as he held him firmly. “I seem to recall telling you that I would explain everything when it was the right time,” he drawled. “That time is not now.”

Jimmy wiggled beneath him, scrunching up his nose as he protested, “I deserve to know. If this really has something to do with my mother, please. Tell me.”

Cold pursed his lips in that gorgeously sexy pout he wore so well, thoughtful and calculating, as he scanned over Jimmy’s body. The borrowed clothing was too big, shapeless, but Cold didn’t seem to mind.

He gazed over Jimmy ravenously as if he were wearing soft silks and exotic leathers instead of baggy sweats. Scooting down onto his elbows, he kept Jimmy pinned while pushing the loose fabric up his stomach. His long fingers carefully traced the lines of Jimmy's lean hips, moving up to feather along his navel.

Jimmy sucked in a sharp breath, amazed at how so few touches could leave him absolutely starving for more. He wanted to touch, too, but he knew better than to try. He was patient, keeping his hands firmly against the mattress where Cold wanted them.

He let Cold continue to pet and tease him, praying silently that he would give him an answer. Something. Anything.

"That ring belonged to Don Luchesi," Cold replied at long last, his tongue running slowly over his top teeth. "Rafaello Luchesi."

RL. Rafaello Luchesi. Holy crap baskets.

"The don who was murdered?" Jimmy exclaimed, eyes wide with disbelief. "Are you sure? I mean... how, how did it end up in my mom's jewelry box?"

"I am positive," Cold replied. "I spent years kissing that ring. I am quite familiar with it. As to how your mother came into possession of it... that I cannot say."

"Can't because you don't know, or can't because you're not telling me?"

"Both," Cold answered smugly, his nimble fingers lightly pinching Jimmy's nipple.

Jimmy whined, his body focusing its circulatory attention down between his legs. He tried to stay on track, demanding, "Why would the Luchesis be willing to kill me over a stupid ring?"

"The don had always planned to pass that ring on to his heir," Cold explained, moving his fingers to Jimmy's other nipple. "When he was murdered, it was stolen; probably by whoever killed him. They searched for it for years, never found it."

"That's why they're trying to start a war?" Jimmy groaned. "Over a ring?"

“Don’t worry about that,” Cold said, shaking his head sternly. “The war was already brewing long before the Luchesis knew about the ring. I am keeping it safe, and I will do everything I can to prevent bloodshed, I promise you. It’s bad for business, after all.”

“So who really killed the don?” Jimmy gasped, Cold’s fingers twisting until it made him squeal.

“Mmmm, most people seem to think it was me,” Cold teased with a wicked smile.

“But then wouldn’t you have had the ring already?” Jimmy argued, yelping at another hard pull.

“Trust that I am looking into it,” Cold soothed, his fingers resuming their delicate torture of Jimmy’s nipples. “I believe your mother’s murder and the don’s may be connected.”

“Really?” Jimmy whined, groaning as Cold pinched him harder.

“Yes, I’ve contacted a very reliable source to look into the case.”

“You mean Geemaw?”

Cold snorted in surprise. “Yes. She’s also the one who’s going to help me free your father.”

“Wait,” Jimmy protested, moaning at another cruel twist. “I heard you and Jules talking about Geemaw before we made the deal for the ring.”

“And?”

Jimmy glared accusingly at Cold. “You only offered to help my dad to get the stupid ring from me.”

“Because there was nothing else you’d be willing to trade it for.”

“But you had me trade for something you were already doing?”

“Mmmhmm,” Cold purred, offering Jimmy mercy and moving his hand down over his side. He nuzzled against Jimmy’s neck, his lips allowing a small and chaste kiss next to his ear.

“That is so freakin’ sneaky! You said you wouldn’t lie to me again—”

“I didn’t lie,” Cold interjected. “I manipulated the situation to our mutual advantage. I get the ring, your father will be freed. I am going to make sure of it.”

“That’s, that’s still so screwed up,” Jimmy groaned as Cold’s hand moved down the front of his pants, grunting appreciatively when he was found hard and leaking. He kept his hips firmly planted against the sheets, trying to resist the urge to thrust up into Cold’s palm.

“Any other burning questions?” Cold asked far too calmly for someone who had their hand wrapped around a dick.

“Yes,” Jimmy continued to protest, gritting his teeth. “Why were you already looking into the case, why...” His eyes widened as a few of the pieces fell into place. “Augustus. You said Augustus lied about something. That’s how you were going to get him. You found something?”

“Gold star for you, Mr. Poe,” Cold purred, squeezing Jimmy’s cock teasingly. “I admire that lovely brain of yours, I do, but right now I’m interested in a very different part of your anatomy... I’m not going to answer any more questions, so I hope you’re satisfied?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy gasped, his eyes fluttering closed. “At least, with, uhm, asking questions... definitely maybe could think of some other... satisfying things to do.”

“Mmmm. It’s not nine o’clock yet,” Cold mused, suddenly releasing his hold and fixing Jimmy with a sly smile.

“Are you really paying that much attention to the time now? Like right now?” Jimmy all but growled, panting haggardly. “Are you serious?”

“Mmm, we should wait until you’re actually on the clock,” Cold taunted.

“Do you want me to beg? Is that what this is?” Jimmy whined, falling boneless against the bed despite a strong urge to kick his feet like an enraged toddler.

“I want to make sure you’re actually up for this,” Cold corrected, his fingers lightly resting on Jimmy’s cheek. “My intention is not to be cruel.”

“Rod,” Jimmy said earnestly, invoking his name to help convey how serious he was, “I could have died today. And when I was down there on the floor, I didn’t have any of that whole life flashing before my eyes or anything. All I thought about was you.”

Cold’s snark was wiped away, replaced with a curiously blank expression. He appeared to be lost, gazing over Jimmy’s face in desperate search of something. He stroked his thumb across Jimmy’s cheek, lightly tracing his brow, commanding quietly, “Then strip, Mr. Poe.”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy said, nodding slowly, that dominant tone seeping right into his soul. He pushed the baggy shirt up over his head and wiggled his pants off in a blink, then watched as Cold moved onto his back, sitting up against the headboard.

Patting his thigh invitingly, Cold beckoned him over, and Jimmy obediently slinked into his lap, surprised when Cold guided his hands up on his shoulders. He was thrilled with being given permission to touch.

Cold gently ran his fingers down Jimmy’s arms, pausing over the bullet wound. He traced around the bandage, his brow furrowing with obvious concern. His touch was tender, gentle, as he said softly, “I wish that bastard was still alive so I could kill him myself.”

“I’m okay,” Jimmy said quietly, bravely moving his hands to rest on Cold’s chest. “I’m here, I’m safe... I’m yours.”

Eyes narrowing, Cold gripped Jimmy’s hips possessively. He rolled his body up against Jimmy’s, making him gasp when he felt how hard he was already. “Mine.”

“Yours,” Jimmy agreed, breathless as he watched Cold grab lube from the bedside table and slick up his fingers. He arched his back, eagerly trying to press into Cold’s hand when he reached between his cheeks.

“Patience,” Cold chastised, not yet penetrating him. “You do realize that this isn’t going to count toward your outstanding balance?”

“Seriously?” Jimmy laughed, grinning up at the gangster and shaking his head. “Yeah, I guess... I guess I’m not that worried about it.”

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# Chapter Nineteen

Once nine o’clock rolled around, Cold gave Jimmy plenty of time to work off some of his debt. Cold tied him up, keeping him stretched out across the bed and teased him for hours before finally giving in and finding their sweet end together. After a long evening of such hard labor, Jimmy passed out with a happy smile on his face.

Too bad he didn’t wake up that way.

Jimmy jerked up from the sheets suddenly, his heart racing and his skin sweating all over. A nightmare, he told himself, it was only a nightmare.

There had been so much blood that it had been gushing down the walls, and his mother had been screaming in his ears. The rain had been pouring outside, thunder crashing and lightning crackling all around the house. The Man in the White Coat had been right there, leering over him, laughing and laughing, but he still had no face.

He didn’t have a face, only a black hole that threatened to swallow Jimmy completely. He had been sucked right into it, falling and falling, waking when his stomach dropped and everything went dark.

Panting hard, Jimmy tried to shake off the remaining panic from the bad dream. It wasn’t real. None of it was real. He sat up, rubbing his hands over his face.

He was in bed alone and fumbled for his phone to see that it was a little after five in the morning. He could hear the shower running, but he didn’t dare disturb Cold. The bathroom door would be locked anyway.

Jimmy reached down around the foot of the bed, feeling for something to wear. The first thing he grabbed was Cold’s dress shirt from last night. He smiled, pulling it on over his head and breathing in the warm and familiar scent of his lover.

He was far too awake to even attempt going back to sleep, slowly padding out of the bedroom and into the den. He had been dying to get a peek at Cold’s vinyl collection, and it was the perfect distraction to settle his

restless mind. He turned on a small lamp, looking around excitedly. He could still hear the shower going. He had time to browse for a few moments.

Carefully thumbing through the records, Jimmy was delighted by the names he found. Sam Cooke, the Pixies, Wild Cherry, the Coasters, Queen, Cheap Trick, the Temptations. He paused when he found one album all the way in the back that didn't have any cover art. He picked it up curiously, reading a small label.

Suzanne.

Cold's mother.

Jimmy couldn't resist, reverently taking the record out of the sleeve and setting it on the player. He bit his lip, anxiously getting the needle into place.

It was jazz, warm and slow, Suzanne's voice rising up over the music with a strength and beauty that made Jimmy's skin prickle with goosebumps. He tried to think of a singer to compare her to; maybe Ella Fitzgerald? Billie Holiday? But no, neither had that faint rough edge that Suzanne did. Neither sang of love with such an intensity that it made Jimmy's heart ache, her voice carrying higher and higher and seeping right into his soul.

Jimmy stood there mesmerized, surprised when the second song began to play and he actually recognized it. It was a jazzy cover of a Patsy Cline song. He began to sing along, softly at first, but stronger as the melody took over. Suzanne's voice was incredibly beautiful, and he slowly swayed his hips as he sang with her, feeling tears in his eyes as the music moved him.

So caught up in the song, he didn't realize someone had turned off the lamp. Strong hands gently rested on his hips, and Jimmy jumped, yelping in terror. He tried to whirl around to see who had grabbed him, but Cold's velvety voice was urgent.

"Don't turn around."

Jimmy froze, the words of the song suddenly lost to him.

"Please..." Cold urged quietly. "Keep singing."

Pressing as close as he could, Jimmy reached back to hold Cold's waist and gasped as he felt bare flesh under his hands. Cold wasn't wearing a shirt. It didn't feel like Cold was wearing much of anything.

Cold smelled fresh and clean from his shower, and Jimmy's chest swelled with the thrill of knowing his lover was naked right behind him. He closed his eyes, his voice picking up the next chorus as he leaned into Cold's warm body.

Cold's hands moved all over him, fingers lightly dancing over the curve of Jimmy's hipbone, reaching up his shirt and tracing along his sides and stomach, gently rocking him in time to his mother's voice. Jimmy melted everywhere Cold touched, his voice stuttering sporadically as he tried not to moan.

Cold had never allowed him to be this close, his chin leaning on Jimmy's shoulder. His arms felt strong, comforting, sliding easily around Jimmy's waist with a familiarity that made his stomach flutter. Jimmy's hands naturally fell to rest on his forearms, still singing, but trying to take in every detail of the exposed flesh.

In the dim glow of the light from the record player's display, he could see a wicked tangle of scars. Some of them wrapped around Cold's arms like snakes, a few were broad lakes of keloided tissue, and others were thin cuts like a spider web etched across his flesh.

Jimmy dared to touch and trace every one he could see. There was tension in Cold's arms at first, but it began to ease away as the music played on. He let Jimmy explore all he wanted, his breathing soft and gentle at his ear.

Turning toward the sensation of warm breath, the last words of the song on his lips, Jimmy felt Cold's mouth ghost over his skin, every muscle in his body winding tight in anticipation. He wanted to kiss Cold so terribly, reaching up to desperately rake his fingers through the man's short hair to finally seize his lips.

Cold flinched away and easily caught Jimmy's wrist, tangling their fingers together as he groaned. Jimmy could sense his indecision and tried to press closer to tip the scales in his favor.

Cold ducked his head away from Jimmy’s kiss, but left his hand where it was. Jimmy hated the rejection, but took full advantage of the new allowance he’d been given. He eagerly stroked his fingers over Cold’s head, dragging through his closely shorn hair, teasing over the edge of his ear. This was a gift.

The next song began, one Jimmy didn’t know, but he picked up the melody quickly. He began to hum along, his breathing hitching as Cold pushed him up against the record player. Cold’s hand traveled south quickly, reaching between their grinding bodies in between Jimmy’s cheeks.

Jimmy’s voice stuttered, breaking off into a symphony of escalating gasps. He rolled his hips against Cold’s hand, keeping rhythm with the music, his nails digging down into his scalp. He was still open and wet from earlier, his singing lost to whimpering moans as Cold pressed deeper inside of him.

The song rolled onto the next and for a few seconds there was no sound but Jimmy’s cries, the wet thrust of Cold’s fingers, and the dull scratch of the record. Jimmy was on the tipping point of madness, smothering kisses against Cold’s ear and neck, breathing, “God... please... don’t stop, don’t stop.”

Cold grunted, his fingers turning and spreading Jimmy until he cried out, grinding against him in time with the tantalizing bass.

“Jimmy,” Cold murmured low, rubbing the head of his bare cock against Jimmy’s hole, “I want to come in you...”

Gurgling dumbly, Jimmy was surprised and instantly sobbing just from the thought. He had never let anyone do that, but Cold... God, yes. He wanted Cold to make him his.

But...

“Only if you’re mine,” Jimmy said.

“What?” Cold seemed startled by the statement.

“Only if you’re mine,” Jimmy stubbornly repeated. “Only if... I’m the only one.”

“Jimmy,” Cold sighed, his tone aching with emotion. He knew exactly what Jimmy was asking for.

“I’m already yours,” Jimmy pleaded. “Please. Be mine?”

“Only you,” Cold said, nuzzling Jimmy’s shoulder with his lips, pressing a soft kiss against his skin. “I can’t be yours, but you’re the only one.”

Jimmy shuddered at the sweet kiss. “Okay.”

A small groan rumbled in Cold’s throat as he started to press his thick cock inside Jimmy. He was slow, each thrust moving with the music as he worked himself in. Once he was fully sheathed, he draped himself over Jimmy’s body, kissing his shoulder again.

Jimmy was a mess of sensation, whining as Cold’s cock filled him so perfectly. It felt so much better without the condom, slick and hot, his mind already running away like mad that he had agreed to let Cold do this.

He wanted it so much, his thoughts consumed with Cold coming inside him now. The warmth of his naked body against Jimmy’s back was incredible, and that feeling alone was enough to leave him wrecked. Even though he couldn’t see him, he could feel a strong chest and firm stomach. He ached to touch, but kept his hands firmly planted on the record player. Jimmy didn’t want to do anything to ruin this.

The music played on, their bodies swaying together as if they were dancing. Cold would thrust deep, as deep as he could until Jimmy moaned and gasped, retreating until he nearly slipped out before pushing back inside again. Jimmy was absolutely lost to it, the passion intensifying as Cold kissed his neck again, lightly sucking at his skin.

Jimmy’s head tipped back against Cold’s shoulder, letting him have free reign of his throat. Cold growled at the invitation, but never bit, never gnashed his teeth. He kept kissing and panting, prompting Jimmy to whisper desperately, “Please, God, I want to kiss you.”

Cold hesitated, his hips starting to slam forward harder as if to work off his obvious frustration. His hands pushed Jimmy’s shirt up, fingers clinging to his sides before wrapping tight around him. He didn’t know what Cold was trying to convey, but it felt desperate, broken.

Jimmy could feel Cold's bare skin against his own, hot and damp with sweat, but no kiss ever came. He moaned, mourning the rejection but loving how Cold fucked him.

No, this wasn't fucking. They'd never had sex like this. This was something beautiful, something Jimmy had never felt before, an experience he didn't dare put words to yet.

He gasped when Cold shifted their bodies, his cock starting to zero in on Jimmy's prostate. It was intense, enough to make his toes curl into the rug. He focused on the feeling, his hands still clutching the edge of the record player.

His moans started to stutter, his whole body tensing up. The pressure inside him was seconds from exploding, and he realized with a groan that he was going to come completely untouched. He had certainly heard about it, read dirty message boards where people shared their experiences, but he had never had it happen.

Until now.

"Rod, I'm, I'm gonna come," Jimmy whimpered, his fingers digging into the edge of the player so hard his knuckles turned white. "Please, please let me come."

Cold made a wonderful sound at that, somewhere between a purr and a low growl, demanding, "Come for me, Jimmy."

Jimmy went blissfully off the edge and straight into oblivion, shaking from head to toe as he came. Cold's cock pounded him through it, and he wept as each slam completely ruined him. The feeling was almost overwhelming, making his eyes water and leaving him gasping for breath. He cried out as Cold's hips became erratic, moaning quietly as he felt a flash of heat deep within as Cold unloaded inside him.

"Oh... my God," Jimmy gasped, whimpering as Cold's thrusts slowed to a crawl. When Cold pulled out, Jimmy could feel his cum dribble out, and his face flushed with more heat, loving the new feeling so much.

"Oh, Jimmy," Cold sighed, rubbing the head of his cock against his leaking hole. "You are... perfect."

Jimmy bowed his head against the record player, sighing softly at the compliment. Cold had used his name several times this evening, and it sounded so dirty and wonderful in that velvety drawl.

The record had been over for some time now, the only sound the duet of their panting breaths. Jimmy moaned appreciatively, arching his hips as he stretched his back. He was warm and fuzzy all over, murmuring contently as Cold kissed his shoulder.

Jimmy touched his cock, amazed that he was still hard after coming like that. It didn't even seem like much had come out.

Cold dropped to his knees suddenly, spreading Jimmy's cheeks and greedily swiping his tongue over his ass. Jimmy's face blushed so hard it burned. Cold was slurping out every drop of his own cum that he could reach, his tongue dipping in and out of Jimmy's gaping hole. It was so dirty and hot, it made Jimmy groan obscenely loud.

Keening and whining as Cold kept going, Jimmy's cock bobbed hard between his legs. There was still so much pressure, and he was scared his knees were going to buckle soon. "Please... fuck."

"What do you need, Jimmy?" Cold rasped, sucking hungrily.

"I don't know," Jimmy panted, snapping his teeth together. "It's... it feels so tight, it... it fucking aches."

"I'll take care of you," Cold promised, his fingers pressing back inside and curling perfectly to massage his prostate. He reached his other hand to grab Jimmy's aching cock, stroking him lovingly.

"Too much," Jimmy sobbed, torn between thrusting back on Cold's fingers inside him or forward into the ones stroking him to sheer oblivion. "Fuck, please... God!"

Jimmy screamed, Cold's quick fingers coaxing him through the most intense orgasm he'd ever felt. It never seemed to end, his cock pulsing and pulsing long streams of thick cum as Cold assaulted his prostate without reprieve until his body quaked.

When Cold finally released him, he gave his hole one last lick and grunted approvingly. Jimmy didn't think he could keep standing much longer, thankful when he felt Cold's strong arms wrap around him. He turned around, his head dropping against Cold's bare chest. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness, focusing on the nest of scars right in front of him.

Twisted, blotchy, countless.

Fingers trembling, he lightly traced over what may have been a stab wound just above Cold's right nipple. Wait, except there wasn't a nipple, not exactly. It was another patch of scar tissue, a thick and dark tear that rippled across his breast.

Cold stiffened like a statue, but didn't yet move away from Jimmy. His voice was strained when he spoke. "I need to get dressed."

Jimmy frowned, peering up at Cold's handsome face. "You know I don't care about these."

"Huh."

"Yes," Jimmy said stubbornly. "I've told you I think you're beautiful."

Oh, that word made Cold tremble. Gently, he began to pull away from Jimmy, saying quietly, "That's a matter of perspective."

"Does that have anything to do with why you won't kiss me?" Jimmy asked with a small huff.

Cold's eyes narrowed, his voice a bitter hiss as he snapped, "What I choose to do or not do with my body is no business of yours, Mr. Poe."

"Wait." Jimmy cringed, quickly trying to repair the obvious damage he had inflicted, exclaiming, "I'm sorry! I just meant—"

"You have work today," Cold said shortly. "The police finished their investigation, and the club will reopen tonight. While I don't expect Dario to be there, you still have rehearsal. I'll make sure there's a suitable replacement in the meantime."

"Please," Jimmy said, reaching for Cold's arm. "I didn't mean—"

Cold jerked away from him, his hand snatching Jimmy around his neck. “Don’t,” he warned, eyes glittering with anger.

Jimmy’s heart sank. They had come so far, and now he felt like he had ruined everything. He gently curled trembling fingers around Cold’s wrist, saying sincerely, “I’m sorry, Rod.”

Cold’s face softened for a brief moment, as if that last apology was actually heard and meant something to him. “Don’t be late,” he said quietly.

Jimmy didn’t try to hold on when Cold pulled away, getting a departing glimpse of his body as he moved back to the bedroom. He heard the bathroom door slam shut, and sighed defeatedly.

Well, fuck. That had ended spectacularly well.

Crawling back into bed, Jimmy pulled the covers up over his head. He didn’t think sleep would come, but he tossed and turned in search of it. He managed to doze off at some point because he didn’t hear Cold leave.

He opened his eyes when he heard polite knocking at the door. Grumbling, he rolled back over and stuck his head under the pillows. He felt terrible for upsetting Cold, and he wasn’t in the mood for company.

The door opened despite his refusal to answer it, a familiar voice calling out, “*Monsieur?* ‘Allo?”

“Jerry?” Jimmy poked his head up. He glanced at his phone, noticing that it was a few minutes after ten.

He also saw that Cold had again not left him a card. He didn’t have a text from him either. Great.

“I am very sorry to bother you,” Jerry quickly apologized as he stepped up to the doorway of the bedroom. He would not cross the threshold, continuing hastily, “There’s a bit of a situation down at the La Belle, and your presence is needed immediately.”

“Me?”

“*Oui*,” Jerry confirmed. “It’s *Mademoiselle* Legrand.” He gestured to the room behind him. “I’ve already brought you some of your clothing from

your, eh, your residence? The rest later, yes, but we need to go."

Jimmy sat up quickly, but didn't make it very far since he wasn't wearing any pants. "Is Rowena okay?"

"She's asking for you," Jerry said with a sad smile, starting to retreat. "Please hurry, and we shall go."

"Right," Jimmy said, a new streak of worry wrinkling up his gut.

Once Jerry had left him, he got up to find clean clothes. Jerry had only brought him suits to wear, so he chose a dark gray pinstripe to put on with his black Chucks. He hurried to the bathroom to fix himself up and change his bandage, smirking wryly at his reflection when he was ready.

He looked like a little kid playing gangster dress-up.

Pausing to take a quick selfie, he then texted it to Cold with a short message:

*See you tonight?*

Jimmy hoped so.

He rushed downstairs to meet Jerry, the chauffeur and chef adding racecar driver to his list of professions as he hauled ass down to La Belle at neck-breaking speeds. Jimmy was a little nauseous as Jerry herded him inside.

Jimmy heard a crash from the upstairs office, grimacing as he jogged up the steps to investigate. He could hear sobbing and something shattering, carefully opening the door and calling out, "Uh, Rowena? It's Jimmy. Please don't throw anything."

The office was plush, decorated in the same theme as the rest of the bar with deep red curtains and dark wooden furniture. Rowena sat on the floor by a small liquor cabinet, glass broken all around her. Jimmy had never seen her looking so distraught.

She was crying, her hair disheveled, makeup smeared, and she only had one shoe on. She looked up blearily as Jimmy walked in, cradling an open bottle of tequila in her lap and sobbing, "Oh, Jimmy. The fucking worst thing ever has happened."

Carefully stepping over the broken glass, Jimmy found a safe place to sit down beside her. “Hey, hey,” he soothed. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“It’s Dario,” she sniffled sadly.

“Is he all right? Did something happen at the hospital?” Jimmy asked, his brow wrinkling in concern.

“No, he’s fine,” Rowena groaned. “He’ll probably be released today. Surgeon said he doesn’t need to be cut on, just lots of physical therapy. God, no, this is much worse.”

“What is it?”

“I think I’m in love with him,” she wailed hysterically.

Jimmy blinked. Clearly, there was something he was missing here. “But? Rowena? Dario is a really nice guy.”

“No, no,” Rowena pouted. “You don’t understand, Jimmy. I’m not a nice guy.”

“Of course you are. I mean, you’re a girl, of course. But you’re super nice. You’re sweet, you’re funny, you’re—”

“A killer,” Rowena sighed horribly.

“What?” Jimmy gulped.

“You know how all the cops think Roddy killed Dickie? Well, it wasn’t him,” Rowena said, taking a long sip of tequila. “I did it.”

Jimmy was glad he was sitting down because otherwise he would have fallen over. “Oh. That’s... uhm.”

“You want me to say I’m sorry, or, or that it was an accident? I can’t,” Rowena blubbered. “I’m not sorry at all. He was a prick. A ridiculous fuckin’ asshole prick. Who I shot a tiny bit.”

“You shot him?” Jimmy was stunned.

“Uhm, about exactly nineteen times.”

“Nineteen?” Jimmy squeaked quietly. “What did you shoot him with, a freakin’ machine gun?”

“No, my Glock,” Rowena clarified. She innocently took a small sip, adding, “I may have reloaded.”

“Oh, you reloaded. That’s, that’s good.”

“Roddy hated him sooo much,” Rowena went on. “Said he was just like Boris, told me I was being stupid. I didn’t see it. Until it was too late.”

Jimmy scooted closer, gently reaching for Rowena’s hand. “Did he... did he hurt you?”

“Yes.” Rowena’s beautiful face contorted with anguish, sniffling pitifully as an obviously painful memory washed over her.

“Oh, Rowena,” Jimmy said in sympathy, leaning close and putting his arm around her shoulders. “I am so, so very sorry.”

“Hey,” Rowena smiled weakly, “shit happens. You know... So. When he was done, I grabbed my gun. I wasn’t going to let him hurt me or anyone else ever again.”

“That could be considered a crime of passion, uhm, even self-defense under the right circumstances,” Jimmy said quickly. “There are ways—”

“Jimmy,” Rowena said dryly, “I stopped to reload. Twice. That shows all that cognitive thought shit, so crime of passion would have been hard to sell.”

“Well, maybe...”

“I unloaded two full clips into him, and then I shot him one more time right in the dick.”

“Oh.”

“And I tried to set him on fire.”

“Oh!” Jimmy tried not to show how horrified he was, patting Rowena’s hand as he stammered, “Well... uh. Jules would have... liked that.”

“That’s why they think it’s Roddy,” Rowena said sadly. “The cops found the body, saw the burns. They think Roddy offed him and Jules tried to hide the evidence.”

“Well, did Dickie have any criminal record? Violent history?”

“Squeaky clean,” Rowena grumbled. “Look, Jimmy, Roddy and I went through all of this, trying to find a way to sell it. I didn’t want Roddy to clean up my mess, but he did. Like he always does.”

“He really loves you,” Jimmy said quietly, offering Rowena some tissues.

“I know,” Rowena sniffed, gratefully accepting the tissues and loudly blowing her nose. “Ugh. It’s all such a mess. All of this? This shit. It’s my fault. It’s why the Luchesis came back.”

“Why? Because they thought Rod was going to get arrested?”

“Yup,” Rowena popped, rolling her eyes. “Have you met the Gentlemen? They’re all good guys, strong, whatever. But Roddy is the one that keeps them in line, keeps them going. Without him, they’d fall apart. So if he went to jail...”

“The Luchesis could make a move to take Strassen Springs back,” Jimmy finished with a frown.

“Roddy is always so careful, but the cops still found Dickie’s body. Everything keeps pointing back to him. All of this shit keeps going wrong, and it’s all because of me.”

“Is that why you’ve been... uhm...”

“Trying to pickle myself?” Rowena chirped with a swig from the bottle. “Mmm, definitely. Not feeling real super about my first kill, okay. Even if the prick fuckin’ deserved it.”

“Do the other Gentlemen know?”

“That I killed Dickie? Jules for sure, Tamerlane is suspicious. The others, meh. They just figure Roddy did it,” she replied with a shrug, her lip beginning to quiver. “Even Dario... God, he means so much to me.”

“What about Dario?” Jimmy asked, petting Rowena’s hand soothingly.

“He thinks Roddy killed him, too, and he’s so sweet, and so kind, fuck. If he ever found out it was me...”

Jimmy almost wanted to laugh, saying sweetly, “You’re afraid that Dario wouldn’t like you if he found out you, uh, killed someone?”

“Would you?” Rowena squeaked miserably.

“I mean. I know Rod has killed people. And I’m sort of, uhm, you know, still with him, and my moral compass has been a tad hazy, and I might be falling for him, which is super crazy, and, God,” Jimmy babbled away, trying to aim for comforting, saying more confidently, “I think love is blind. Okay? And I think when you love someone, you look over stuff. No matter how bad it is. And I know for a fact that Dario is freakin’ crazy about you.”

“Really?” Rowena’s big blue eyes were wide and hopeful.

“Really,” Jimmy confirmed with a warm smile.

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Rowena sobbed happily, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tight. “You’re such a good friend.”

“Oh, sure,” Jimmy laughed, wondering if it was possible for his life to get any crazier. “You know, anytime. So, just to make sure we’re on the same page, this actually does qualify as super-secret mob stuff?”

Rowena chuckled. “Yes, sweetie. This is super-secret mob stuff. Keep your lips zipped or it’s the fishes for you.”

“Got it.”

Rowena took a deep breath, straightening herself up and wiping off her face. She smirked slyly, teasing, “You know you totally admitted that you’re falling in love with my brother.”

Jimmy’s ears spontaneously caught on fire. “I-I did? I guess... I guess I did.”

“You guys doing okay?”

“Uh...” Jimmy thought about their little tiff this morning that had been preceded by some pretty incredibly passionate sex. “Two steps forward, half a step back?”

“Progress.”

“What about you? Are you gonna be okay?”

“Oh, sure, sweetie,” Rowena replied with a bright smile, her usual swagger trying to crawl back into place. “I’ll make it.”

“Without developing cirrhosis of the liver?” Jimmy challenged, gently prying the bottle away from her.

She pouted. “Maybe.”

“I think Dario may surprise you if you let him,” Jimmy said. “You know, just be honest with him. I think you guys could be really happy together.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, playfully bumping their shoulders together. “Worth a try, right?”

There was a tentative knock at the door, Jerry hesitantly poking his head inside, asking, “Everything all right now?”

“Oh, Jerry,” Rowena gushed tearfully, “I am so sorry I screamed at you and called you a frog cunt sucking whatever it was. And for throwing a bottle at you. And all that other stuff.”

Jerry smiled kindly, reassuring her, “Think nothing of it, *mademoiselle*.”

Rowena snatched the bottle back from Jimmy, smiling sweetly at Jerry. “You’re the best. Thank you for bringing Jimmy. I think we’re all gonna be okay now.”

“Of course,” Jerry replied, fidgeting expectantly. “Eh, Mr. Poe?”

“What is it, Jerry?”

“You have a visitor. A young lady, very insistent that she must see you.”

“Young lady?”

Rowena waved her hand, saying, “Go on. I’ll be down in a little while. Jerry, just keep an eye on things for me? Make sure she’s cool? Until Roddy gets here?”

“Of course,” Jerry said with an obedient nod. “I’ll be waiting downstairs for you, *monsieur*.”

“So. Rod’s coming here?” Jimmy asked casually once Jerry had left. He tried not to sound too excited.

“Awww, somebody wants to see their loveykins?” Rowena teased, batting her eyes.

“Yeah, but I don’t know if he wants to see me. We had a fight,” Jimmy said with a wrinkle of his nose. “Things were going really well. Like, wow, really well. But I think I pissed him off.”

Rowena’s lovely face creased with worry. “Well, if you’re close enough to actually get under his skin, I’d say you’re doing better than you think, sweetie.” She ran her hands through her tangled hair, sighing, “Look. I need to freshen up.”

“Yeah, got it,” Jimmy nodded, scrambling up to his feet.

“We’ll talk more later, I promise. If you need anything, Jerry will be keeping an eye on you.”

“Thanks, Rowena.”

“Hey, thank you, Jimmy,” Rowena said with a sweet smile. “Now, go on! Go see who your mysterious visitor is. Maybe it’s a talent scout!”

“Ha! Right!” Jimmy laughed.

Rowena blew him as a kiss as he trotted out, taking a deep breath before he started back downstairs.

Playing matchmaker by assuring his new best friend that her crush wouldn’t care about her being a murderess. Yup. Just another day in the life of a mafia boyfriend, Jimmy thought crazily. Things couldn’t get any more insane, right?

Jimmy looked around to see who his visitor was, but he only saw Jerry at first.

“Over there, *monsieur*,” Jerry said and pointed him to a table on the other side of the bar. There was indeed a young woman waiting there, and she

stood up when he began walking toward her.

Jimmy gawked dumbly, unable to stop himself from smiling when he recognized her as his old friend and Augustus' daughter. "Anna?"

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# Chapter Twenty

“Why, Jimmy Poe,” Anna Duplin gushed happily, a dazzling smile lighting up her beautiful face. “Look at you!”

Jimmy grinned dopily, his cheeks heating up from the appreciative gaze Anna passed over him in his sharp suit. “Yeah, uhm, thanks,” he said shyly. “But wow, look at you! You look incredible!”

She was even more lovely than Jimmy remembered, dressed in a cute floral print dress and sandals. Casual and equal parts elegant and stylish. She looked absolutely amazing.

“Come here!” Anna insisted, pulling Jimmy in for a big hug.

Jimmy didn’t protest one bit, laughing, “What are you doing back in Strassen?”

“Well, I graduated school a few years ago in Raleigh, interned at the News and Observer, uhm, moved to Baltimore for a while,” Anna babbled excitedly. “I’ve just been everywhere! But Strassen Springs News offered me a position as a lead reporter a few months ago, and I couldn’t resist coming back home.”

“That’s awesome!” Jimmy said. “Uhm, wanna sit down? Catch up a little? I’ve got a few minutes before rehearsal, I think.”

“Sure!” Anna sat back in her seat, smiling sweetly. “Rehearsal, huh? Jimmy Poe the nightclub singer. Wow. Definitely not what I had pictured for you at all.”

“No?” Jimmy sat across from her, blushing when Anna scooted down a seat so they were right next to each other.

“No! I thought you’d be uptown in some swanky condo,” she laughed. “You know, taking all the big high dollar cases. Fancy car, Rolex, all that.”

“Yeah, not so much.” Jimmy’s smile wavered for a moment. Right career, wrong goal. “I’ve been doing okay, though.”

“Well, not to be too forward,” Anna said in a voice that indicated she was going to be exactly that, “but Dad told me some pretty crazy stuff. Like, you’ve been shacking up with a gangster?”

“Uhhh, wow. Well. He is not wrong.”

“Jimmy!” Anna gasped, leaning close as if they were sharing a dirty secret, her hand resting on his arm. “You’re seriously dating Roderick Legrand? Boss Cold?”

“Dating is a strong word,” Jimmy admitted sheepishly. “But yes, we’ve been seeing each other, and uhm, it’s... it’s going well.”

“I saw them putting your name out on the marquis when I pulled up,” Anna squealed. “I’d say things are going really well. How did you guys meet?”

“It’s an interesting story,” Jimmy replied carefully.

“I’m a reporter, I love interesting stories!” Anna teased.

“Okay, well, this is off the record!”

“I’ve already been patted down for any recording devices or weapons,” Anna assured him, nodding back at Jerry. “Like seriously, he searched me. Little intense.”

“They’re very, uh, protective.”

“So, dish! How did you end up with big ol’ Boss Cold?”

“Well, I got into a little financial trouble,” Jimmy began, trying to find the nicest way to explain the unusual situation he had found himself in. “I owed a lot of money to Cold actually. We, eh, came up with a deal to pay it off. He helped me get this job, and uhm, so, I’m paying him back here and there.”

“But you’re sleeping together,” Anna asked bluntly.

“Yes,” Jimmy replied, wishing he could stop the flow of blood above his neck.

“Jimmy,” Anna said slowly, as if she was concerned he wouldn’t understand what she was about to say, “it sounds like you’re prostituting yourself out.”

“No,” Jimmy said quickly, “it’s not like that! Not at all! Well. At first, maybe sort of? But everything is okay now. I mean, see, he only came to me because he was trying to get to Augustus since he’s investigating him, but then Maury had told me that Cold might be willing to make a deal, and he’s not worried about Augustus anymore anyway, and—”

“Whoa, whoa! Slow down!” Anna looked horrified. “Wait, wait, wait. So this deal to pay off your debt came about because Cold thought he could use you to manipulate Dad?”

“No, well... it sounds really bad when you say it that way,” Jimmy said with a grimace.

“Yeah, it sounds pretty sick,” Anna said, not even bothering to hide her contempt. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I had no job, no money, and no one else to fucking turn to,” Jimmy replied honestly. “Yeah, it’s not a perfect fairy tale or anything, but it’s worked out. I’m happy. I’m doing just fine now, thank you.”

“Getting shot at is just fine? Yeah, Dad told me about that, too.”

“That doesn’t normally happen?” Jimmy squeaked in protest. “I mean, there’s just a lot of stuff happening right now, and uh, you know. Gangster related... stuff.”

“Jimmy, you have your whole life ahead of you,” Anna chastised. “Why don’t you just get out of here and finish school? I still can’t believe you dropped out! I didn’t believe Dad when he told me. You were doing so great!”

Jimmy tried to pull away but Anna held onto his hand, prompting him to sigh in protest, “Look, things are just... complicated.”

“I’m worried about you,” Anna said sincerely.

“Yeah. So worried you waited until today to find me,” Jimmy said with a faint scowl.

“Jimmy,” she scolded. “I’ve thought about you all the time. I’m—”

“Didn’t you say you’ve been back for months?” Jimmy demanded, eyeing his old friend suspiciously. He was happy to see Anna, but the timing of her sudden visit was quite suspect.

“Yes, but Jimmy, I’ve been really busy!”

“Busy? We haven’t spoken in years, Anna. You run off to Raleigh for school, I don’t ever hear from you. Not a letter, not a postcard. After all of this time, you just come flouncing in here, concerned and caring and you act like nothing happened.”

“I’m sorry, Jimmy,” Anna said, her smile a little sad. “I really want to try being friends again.”

“Do you even remember the last time we talked?” Jimmy’s eyes began to slowly fill with tears. “Thanksgiving, I think? Like, six years? Five? When me and Augustus got into that big fight about my dad. Which, by the way, ha! Not once have you asked about how my dad is doing. Not once is he okay, how he’s holding up.”

“Well, Jimmy, he’s in prison,” Anna said softly. “What do you want me to say?”

“Maybe to actually give a shit?” Jimmy spat. “To maybe think for yourself for once and not parrot back everything that Augustus fuckin’ says?”

“Jimmy,” Anna scoffed, shocked by his tone and language.

“Come on, if Augustus told you the moon was made of ice cream, you would ask what flavor.”

“That’s not true, I do question him! Constantly!”

“Not about my dad,” Jimmy accused.

“Jimmy, I’m very sorry,” Anna said, her voice strained yet firm, “but your dad is exactly where he belongs. In prison.”

She might as well have slapped Jimmy right in the face. He swallowed back a few bitter tears, asking flatly, “Why are you really here, Anna?”

“Dad wanted me to try and talk some sense into you,” Anna said, crossing her arms over her chest. “See if it’s not too late to save you before you get

yourself killed."

"So you came to do Augustus' dirty work?"

"I came here because I'm worried about an old friend," Anna sighed, pressing forward and resting her hand on Jimmy's leg. "We used to be so close, Jimmy. I still do care about you, believe it or not."

Jimmy shook his head, but patted her hand as he said, "And I care about you. But... this is what my life is now. I'm finally getting shit straight. I know it doesn't look like it, but I am. I have a new job that pays really well, I'll be able to get my student loans under control in just a few months. I mean, crap, I actually will be able to go back to school eventually. I'll be able to pay for it all myself. And I don't care what you or Augustus or anybody says about Cold. You don't know him like I do. There is so much good in him. The way he cares about the people close to him, how he tries to help them. He really believes in me; something you and Augustus never did."

"Jimmy," Anna pleaded, "you're talking about a convicted murderer. A criminal who—"

"Who has done nothing but take care of me," Jimmy said firmly. "Look, it was really good to see you, but I'm not going anywhere. I won't leave him, and I definitely am not going to do anything to help Augustus."

"You used to care about doing what was right," Anna challenged, "and now, this... this place, your job, that suit. I don't even know who you are."

"Well," Jimmy said with a sad smile, recalling Anna's earlier comment about Rolexes and a swanky condo, "I'm starting to think you never did."

"Jimmy, please. I want to help you. My dad wants to help you."

"I'm good," Jimmy said stubbornly. "Really."

"You're going to get yourself killed or end up in prison like your dad," Anna warned. "I don't want that for you. We can still get you out of this mess. You could come stay with me or Dad. I might be able to help find you a new job."

“Your generosity is amazing,” Jimmy laughed bitterly. “I’m just, wow, blown away. You know I almost starved one time? And oh. There was that time I almost died because I couldn’t afford to go see a doctor. I was almost homeless more times than I can count. And where was your concern then? Where was Anna and Augustus wanting to save Jimmy then, huh?”

Anna was silent.

“Oh, but now! Now that I’m with Cold, all of a sudden you want to come save me,” Jimmy went on, too disgusted to even care how nasty he was being. “What freakin’ right do you have? You can’t just magically pop up and pretend all those years you weren’t there for me didn’t happen and decide that you and Augustus know what’s best for me!”

Jimmy was on his feet, prying Anna’s hand off his leg, his anger compromised by his aching heart. He had been in love with Anna once. It hurt deeply that she had only come here to do Augustus’ bidding.

“I think it’s time for you to go,” Jimmy said quietly.

Anna rose up slowly, winding her arms around Jimmy’s shoulders and pulling him into a gentle hug. She sounded broken when she said, “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t... I wasn’t always a good friend. I know that. I can’t take it back, and I’m sorry. If you ever change your mind—”

“I won’t,” Jimmy promised her, but couldn’t stop himself from hugging her back. “It... it really was good to see you.”

“You, too,” Anna sighed, still holding him close. “Maybe I’ll come and catch your show sometime?”

“Yeah, I’m sure Augustus would love that,” Jimmy snorted.

Anna pulled back to fix Jimmy with a stubborn look. “I really don’t always listen to Augustus, you know. I am my own person.”

Jimmy raised a skeptical brow. “Really?”

“In fact, I have my own dating drama. Not nearly as exciting as dating a gangster, but I’m dating a cop.”

Jimmy burst into laughter, stunned. “Wow. I bet Augustus freakin’ loves that.”

“It’s his partner, too.”

“Holy crap, okay,” Jimmy conceded with a small chuckle, “Anna Duplin is her own person. Got it.”

“Damn right I am. And I didn’t just come here because Dad told me to. I came because I really care, Jimmy. I’m just... this is crazy.”

“I know, but I’m happy. Maybe I am crazy, but this is it for me. I really wish you all the best, Anna, I do, but I’m not going anywhere.”

Anna looked heartbroken, but she nodded tearfully. “Well, you’re an idiot,” she said with a small laugh, “but you’re a grown idiot, and I can’t change your mind, so.”

Jimmy hugged her tight, closing his eyes and rubbing her back soothingly. He knew now that the distance between them would likely never be repaired, but he could hold onto this moment.

He could remember the girl he loved and the friendship he mourned, knowing that some things were just not meant to be. Maybe in another lifetime, but not this one.

“If you try to print any of what we talked about, I’ll sue you for libel,” Jimmy teased.

“You’re not a lawyer yet,” Anna laughed.

“Yeah, well, I can afford one now,” Jimmy snickered, “so just watch out.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Anna promised, kissing Jimmy’s cheek tenderly.

Jimmy blushed.

Jerry cleared his throat loudly.

Boss Cold was here, Tamerlane and Lorre flanking either side of him. They were all dressed to the nines, and Jimmy had no problem admitting how weak in the knees the sight of Cold in a suit made him.

Black pinstripe with fresh lilies pinned to his lapel, white spats, Christ. Jimmy was more than pleased to see Anna checking him out. Criminal or not, even she couldn't deny how stunning Cold looked.

Jimmy hadn't heard them come in, blinking in surprise as all three men stared him and Anna down. "Uh, hey!"

"Miss Duplin," Cold greeted with a click of his tongue.

Oh, he looked angry. Deceptively calm on the outside, but Jimmy knew better. Cold was severely pissed off. Jimmy gently pushed away from Anna, smiling bashfully. He didn't know why, but he felt an odd lurch of guilt, as if Cold had walked in on him doing something much more intimate than hugging.

"You know who I am?" Anna scoffed, arching her brows in surprise.

"I know a great many things," Cold replied shortly.

*Yeah, like where you live*, Jimmy thought to himself with a gulp.

He gave Anna a quick pat on her shoulder, saying quickly, "Look, it really was great catching up and all, but uh, take care of yourself, okay?"

"You, too," Anna said, offering a sympathetic smile. "Take care, Jimmy. Try not to do anything stupid."

"Not making a promise I can't keep," Jimmy said with a shrug and a smirk. "Goodbye, Anna."

"Bye, Jimmy!" She waved, nervously making her way around Cold and the Gentlemen.

Jimmy bounced anxiously on the balls of his feet, turning back at Cold. "So, uh—"

"Upstairs," Cold barked, his voice so loud it made Jimmy flinch. He took a deep breath, more calmly adding, "Right now."

Jimmy heard Lorre and Tamerlane snicker to themselves as he raced up the stairs to the office, his heart pounding with dread. It was the same feeling of trepidation as being marched through school to see the principal. He wasn't

sure what exactly he had done wrong, but it was very obvious Cold was not happy with him.

Cold looked around the trashed office disgustedly as he walked in, groaning, “What the fuck happened in here?”

“Rowena,” Jimmy explained, “and a half bottle of tequila. She was upset because she doesn’t think Dario will like her any more if he finds out she killed Dickie—”

“She told you?” Cold stared heavenward, saying out loud to no one in particular, “I’m going to kill her.”

“Look, I’m sorry. She, she wanted to talk, I didn’t know what she was going to tell me. You know you can trust me.”

“Oh, can I?” Cold narrowed his eyes into venomous slits, his upper lip curling defiantly as he slammed the door shut behind them. “Is that why I saw you cozied up with Miss Duplin? Because you’re so trustworthy?”

“She just showed up!” Jimmy protested, eyes wide in disbelief. “I had no idea she was going to be here! Are you being serious right now? Look, I wanted to apologize for this morning. I know I upset you—”

“After all that I’ve done for you,” Cold seethed, “you let her put her hands on you. Right in front of me.”

“All you’ve done... are you freakin’ high?” Jimmy argued, throwing his hands up in frustration. “What have you freakin’ done for me, huh? Lie to me, manipulate me, use me—”

“I’ve clothed you, I’ve fed you, I’ve provided for you, I’ve allowed you to share my bed,” Cold snarled back, his voice rising to overtake Jimmy’s. “Everything I have done has been for you!”

“And for you, too!” Jimmy countered. “Don’t you dare act like you’ve been some selfless saint! You do remember how this all started, right? Don’t insult me like that!”

“You mean like how you insulted me with Miss Duplin? Hanging all over her?” Cold challenged, his eyes shiny and bright with anger.

“Oh, my God,” Jimmy gasped as realization clicked into place. “You’re jealous.”

Cold scowled, but didn’t deny it.

“She’s just an old friend,” Jimmy groaned, exasperated. “And we’re probably not even going to be friends now! If you had shown up like two seconds earlier, you would have heard me defending you!”

“Was that before or after her lips were all over you?” Cold asked in a sickeningly sweet voice.

“I’m not interested in Anna! I don’t want her!”

Cold did not look convinced.

Jimmy was getting frustrated, snapping, “You’re all that I want, Rod! Just you! It’s crazy and it’s stupid, but I do. Even when you push me away all the time, even though you refuse to kiss me—”

“I am giving you everything I fucking can!” Cold was in his space in a second, forcing Jimmy to stumble back into the desk, his teeth bared as he growled quietly, “I have given you so fucking much, and still, you want more! It’s never enough!”

“I’m not going to apologize for going after what I want!” Jimmy protested passionately, grabbing onto the edge of the desk to steady himself. “I want to be with you, Rod! I want this to be real! I don’t want to be your freakin’ whore anymore! I don’t want any more stupid deals! Why can’t I actually just be your boyfriend? Why can’t you just admit—”

“You’re whatever the fuck I want you to be when I want you to be it,” Cold snapped back, his hands sliding around Jimmy’s neck. “You’re mine.”

“But you’ll never be mine, right?” Jimmy spat defiantly, fingers curling tight around Cold’s wrists. “You know, maybe you should be jealous. At least I know Anna wouldn’t be afraid to kiss me.”

“Oh, you fucking brat. You have no idea what it’s like to be afraid,” Cold sneered, something hurt and wild clouding his eyes.

“I’m afraid all the time!” Jimmy wailed, his eyes beginning to flood with tears. “I’m afraid to go to sleep sometimes because of what I might dream about, I’m afraid for my dad, that something is gonna happen to him in prison, I’m afraid for myself... I’m afraid you’re never going to care about me even half as much as I care about you.”

Time seemed to slow down, Cold’s hands tight enough to make Jimmy’s breath catch, and he could feel Cold’s pulse thrumming rapidly under his fingers.

Just like the day they met.

The energy in the air began to shift, the anger retreating from Cold’s gaze. He was so beautiful and he looked frightfully lost, staring down at Jimmy’s mouth as if he could find all the answers he needed there. He suddenly lunged forward.

Cold crashed their lips together in a passionate kiss, their teeth clicking from the force of it. It was messy, heated, and Jimmy was crying instantly. He had wanted this for so long. Squeezing Cold’s wrists, he pressed his body into his.

Cold began to regain control, his lips now like velvet, smoothly gliding against Jimmy’s. They tasted as wonderful as Jimmy had always dreamed, moaning as Cold’s tongue seductively slipped its way into his mouth. Cold’s hands at his neck were firm, tilting Jimmy’s head to find the perfect angle as they kissed, their mouths dancing together so sweetly. A kiss had never felt this damn good, giving Cold everything he had, his body trembling.

Knees wobbling, Jimmy gasped, “Can I please... can I please touch you?”

“Yes,” Cold purred, sighing as Jimmy’s hands immediately slid up his arms and around his shoulders.

Jimmy gasped again as Cold grabbed him around his waist, lifting him up onto the desk. The keyboard and a jar of pens clattered onto the floor as he pulled Cold close, wrapping his legs around his hips. He kept kissing him, afraid to lose contact even for a moment. He kissed Cold like he was

starved for it, greedily taking every taste and sensation and going in for more.

Cold's hands were all over him and the way he dominated the kiss, the savage manner in which he just took and took was driving Jimmy absolutely wild. He wanted Cold inside him and scrambled to loosen his pants, moaning loudly.

Cold was on the same page, his hands clawing at every inch of Jimmy and sliding down his hips. There was hardly any grace between them, trying to unsnap buttons and pull away fabric, desperate to get at each other as quickly as possible.

Palming the sides of Cold's face, Jimmy kissed him eagerly, one leg still in his pants even as he lifted his hips to yank down his briefs. Cold was going to fuck him right there on the desk, and it was going to be so damn good.

This was perfect, hot, and wait, why was the door opening?

Why was Rowena standing there with that smug look on her face, teasing, "Awww, I see you guys have made up!"

"Working on it," Jimmy panted, smiling stupidly.

He was glad to see Rowena had cleaned herself up, makeup and hair flawless as usual, and she had both shoes on now.

Cold looked annoyed, turning his head to glare at his sister. "Need something, sis? Maybe confess to some more crimes?"

Rowena grinned slyly. "Oh, I don't know. Let me go commit a few more, and then I'll get back to you." She tried peering around her brother to peek at Jimmy, giggling, "You guys are definitely working on some lovely indecent exposure charges, you know."

Cold stared, unbuckling his belt and pulling his pants down, giving his sister full view of his bare ass. "Is this indecent enough for you?"

"Oh, ew, gross!" Rowena squealed, laughing. "Fine! I'll leave you alone! I just wanted to tell you everyone is here except Jules and Corman. Have fun making up!" She giggled loudly, quickly exiting and slamming the door.

Cold rolled his eyes, smirking at Jimmy. “Making up... is that what we’re doing?”

“I hope so,” Jimmy replied honestly, glancing down at Cold’s hard cock bobbing between them. He leaned forward, softly kissing Cold. “I am sorry, Rod.”

Cold flinched slightly, his hands resting on Jimmy’s thighs.

“I’m really sorry,” Jimmy said again, hoping Cold knew how much he meant it. “I’ll try to be more patient. I didn’t mean to push you so hard. I just... I need some sort of... commitment.”

Tilting his head, Cold pursed his lips in that thoughtful way of his, but said nothing.

“I’m kind of, uh, putting myself out there,” Jimmy said nervously. “Don’t leave me hanging. Please. If you don’t wanna be mine, I get it. I mean, I don’t get it, but... I need something, Rod.”

“I spent almost all of my life as property,” Cold replied quietly. “I was a thing. To be used however they wanted.” He closed his eyes as if to fight off a wave of pain, continuing firmly, “I swore that once I was free, no one would ever own me again. No one. I will never be yours because I refuse to belong to anyone except myself.”

Jimmy couldn’t help the look of despair that came over him, both for Cold’s admission of his earlier life and his adamant declaration that he would never be his. He could feel his heart breaking, his eyes already damp with fresh tears. That couldn’t be it, it just couldn’t be.

“Rod,” Jimmy pleaded softly, ready to fight, ready to beg if he had to. He sniffed, quieting down when Cold shook his head. He wasn’t done yet.

“But,” Cold said, his voice smooth and gentle, hands cradling Jimmy’s face, “what I can give you is this; one final deal. I’m offering you my loyalty, my affection, my home, and my bed. For as long as you want it.”

“And in return?” Jimmy asked softly, eyes wide and hopeful. “What do I have to do?”

“Be mine, Jimmy,” Cold replied sincerely. “Be mine always. Be loyal to me and only me. Be mine, and I promise that I will always take care of you.”

“So,” Jimmy asked coyly, “I’ll actually be a mafia boyfriend?”

Cold scoffed, rolling his eyes as he dryly replied, “Yes, Jimmy.”

“What about money, all the money I owe you?” Jimmy asked quickly.

“Consider it a signing bonus and your debt forgiven,” Cold snorted. “I will still help get your father out of prison. You’ll continue working here at the club for as long as you’d like, but I still control what happens in the bedroom. My rules, everything at my discretion, always. That’s not negotiable.”

“Fine,” Jimmy chirped happily.

“Now, tell me, Jimmy,” Cold drawled, studying Jimmy’s face carefully, “is that enough for you?”

“That’s enough,” Jimmy assured him. “That’s enough for me. If that’s what you’re offering, I’m taking it. All of it. I’m yours.”

“Thought you might,” Cold teased, tilting his head and capturing Jimmy’s lips in another deep kiss.

Jimmy moaned, melting against him. He could feel Cold’s cock pressing against his thigh and mewled softly in anticipation. He was already trying to figure out if spit would be adequate enough lube when there was a heavy knock at the door.

“What!” Cold roared, enraged by yet another interruption.

Jules walked in, not deterred by Cold’s obvious fury, rumbling, “Hey, Boss. It’s time.”

Cold growled, glancing back at Jimmy and taking a deep breath.

Jules waved, cheerfully greeting, “Heya, Twig. Glad you’re doin’ okay.”

“Hi, Jules,” Jimmy sighed. “Thank you, by the way. You know, for doing that thing and saving me.”

“Next time, listen to what the fuck I tell you to do,” Jules snorted. He looked expectantly at Cold. “Gotta go, Boss.”

Eyes glancing up to doubtlessly curse the heavens, Cold bit out, “Be right there.”

Jules gave them some privacy, retreating out the door, but he left it open.

Cold dressed himself with a sour sneer, stepping away to allow Jimmy to hop off the desk. He pulled him in for yet another searing kiss, letting it linger for a long moment. Visibly struggling to break away, he purred, “To be continued.”

“Definitely,” Jimmy agreed, struggling to shove his erection away. He made himself presentable, asking hopefully, “Tonight?”

“Yes,” Cold said. “I have important business to attend to, but I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said, eagerly going in for another kiss.

Cold allowed it, gently touching the side of Jimmy’s neck. “Goodbye, Jimmy.”

“Bye,” Jimmy sighed adoringly, watching the gangster leave. He flopped back against the desk, smiling stupidly.

Cold had finally kissed him.

They had kissed, and it had been beautiful and perfect, and Jimmy knew he was completely head over heels for the gorgeous gangster. They were actually going to be together now as a real couple. Cold’s estate was going to be their home. He was going to be his boyfriend.

Jimmy had never been so happy.

He practically floated downstairs to find Cold and the Gentlemen were all gone, even Rowena. Jerry, chef and racecar driver, was also apparently an amateur pianist, waiting patiently for Jimmy to join him on stage for rehearsal.

They went through the set until Jimmy was exhausted, Jerry allowing a small break before running him through it a few more times. They stayed

until the club was getting ready to open, and Jerry finally agreed to take Jimmy home.

Jimmy was delighted to find all of his clothing had been brought over, but decided to wait before putting anything away. He had a feeling that Cold would be particular about which side of the closet he chose, grinning when he saw his shoebox of photographs at the foot of the bed. Inside the shoebox was his mother's jewelry box as well, and he looked over his little treasures with a happy smile.

After carefully putting the box under the bed, Jimmy took a shower, threw on his robe, and snuggled into bed to wait for Cold.

Time ticked by and soon, Jimmy had started to doze off. He snapped awake when he heard the doors all slamming open, heavy footsteps thundering toward him. He sat up, startled as the lumbering figure of Jules Price came rushing in.

Jules looked distraught, his shirt soaked in blood, eyes wild with anger and fear.

"Jules!" Jimmy bolted to his feet, staring at all the blood. It was everywhere, and he tried to keep the room from spinning as he stuttered, "What's, what's wrong? The blood..."

"It ain't mine," Jules panted, grimacing miserably. "It's Boss'."

"Rod," Jimmy gasped, his heart seizing against his ribcage. "How bad?"

"Well, it sure as fuck ain't good."

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# Chapter Twenty-One

Jimmy thought he was going to be sick, his chest crushed by anxiety and fear. “Is he... is Rod gonna be okay?”

Jules came forward, big hands grabbing Jimmy’s shoulders and squeezing. “The doc is on her way, okay? But we gotta get ready. Lorre and Pym are bringin’ Boss. They were right behind me. You’re gonna help me get all this shit set up.”

Trembling, Jimmy nodded tearfully. “Tell me, just tell me what to do.”

“Come on,” Jules urged, gesturing to Jimmy to start stripping the bed. They pulled off all the sheets, Jules throwing down a plastic tarp. Jimmy didn’t even know where he had gotten it from. It was just suddenly there, Jules shoving one end at him to drape over the bed.

They tucked it all around the mattress, and Jules dragged one of the bedside tables out of the way.

Tamerlane was there next, his face bloodied and carrying a large fluorescent lamp, panting, “They’re not here yet?”

“Does it look like they are?” Jules snapped, taking the lamp and positioning it next to the bed.

“Fuck you!” Tamerlane spat.

“Fuck you!” Jules barked back. “They’ll be here.”

“What happened?” Jimmy asked in a tiny, frightened voice, wrapping his arms tightly around himself.

Tamerlane glanced at Jules before replying, “Meeting with the Luchesis. Went bad. Real bad. We got a rat in the house.”

“You mean a traitor?” Jimmy clarified.

“Uh huh,” Tamerlane said with a nod. “No one knew where the meeting was going down until the last minute. And yet, some fuckhead with a gun

came blazing in, aiming for Cold and Matteo Luchesi. Matteo didn't get hit, but Cold..."

"He took two bullets, both gut shots," Jules said gently, trying to soothe the terrified look on Jimmy's face. "He's bleedin' bad, but he's fightin'. We got Doc Queen on her way, and that's the baddest bitch I know."

"Can't you take him to a hospital?" Jimmy squeaked.

"And get him arrested? Fuck, come on now," Jules gruffed. "Cops are all over the place as it is now. Another big fuckin' problem."

"Wh-what is?" Jimmy stammered, trying to follow along.

"Cops were on their way before the gunman started shooting," Tamerlane explained. "We heard sirens before the first shot."

"A setup," Jimmy gasped, hastily scrubbing his hands across his face. "But by who? The Luchesis? Would they risk taking out their own guy to get Cold?"

Tamerlane and Jules exchanged concerned looks as if they had already said too much. Before they could decide on whether or not to confirm Jimmy's suspicions, there was a new commotion from downstairs. It was a rush of raised voices, something being knocked over and broken, and a loud groan of pain.

Rod.

Jules and Tamerlane rushed off out of sight, leaving Jimmy to stand there feeling like a fool. He didn't know if he needed to go help, if he needed to be doing something. He was scared and useless, his heart clinging to his tonsils as he rocked back and forth on his heels by the bed.

Jules returned, Boss Cold in his arms, limp and pale. "Come here, help me," he grumbled at Jimmy, nodding for him to join him at the bed. "Hold his head."

Jimmy obeyed, cradling Cold's head as Jules lowered him.

Cold was sweaty, almost gaunt from the blood loss, his eyes fluttering open to see who was touching him. He seemed to relax when he saw Jimmy,

groaning softly.

“Hey, Rod,” Jimmy soothed, the tarp crinkling beneath him as he crawled up on the bed.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Cold murmured. His eyes closed. “Sorry I’m late.”

“It’s okay. Really.” Petting Cold’s brow, he tried to smile and ignore the blood that had soaked his shirt and pants. He could see it oozing through the makeshift bandage that had been applied to Cold’s side, and he demanded sharply, “Where is the doctor?”

“Right here,” a firm, smooth voice called out, heels clicking loudly on the wooden floors as she approached. She was a thin woman with a shock of peroxide blonde hair. Jimmy would have almost mistaken her for frail, but her expression told a completely different story. Despite her petite frame, her entire energy screamed of danger and strength as she quickly gloved up and sat on the edge of the bed next to Cold.

A young woman accompanied her, bright and quick, carrying a large surgeon’s bag and starting to pull out a plethora of equipment.

“Abigail,” the doctor ordered, “start two IVs. I want a saline drip and start pushing morphine stat. Mr. Legrand is not going to like what we’re about to do.”

“He’s not?” Cold mumbled, gritting his teeth.

“Get a blood pack going, too,” she continued, ignoring him. “He’s already lost too much.”

Jimmy watched the doctor cut Cold’s shirt and jacket out of the way, tearing the fabric until his entire torso was bare. He tried not to look, he really did, but he had been aching to get a glimpse of Cold’s body.

He was softer than Jimmy had imagined, but there was still firm muscle aplenty despite the lack of definition he had always fantasized about. There was a light misting of hair gracing his pecs that grew a little thicker as it traveled down his stomach and below. A faint hint of silver shimmered even there, and when the circumstances were different, Jimmy was going take the time to properly appreciate how sexy he thought it was.

But the scars, the tapestry of agony weaved from a lifetime of abuse, they seemed more horrifying than the two bullet wounds currently spouting blood from Cold's side. There were dozens, all in varying shapes and sizes, too many to count, though there were a definite few that screamed for attention.

The most obvious was one Jimmy had seen before, the jagged wreck of tissue that had claimed Cold's right nipple. There was another nightmare of marbled dark tissue streaking across the left side of his stomach several inches over.

Despite all the damage, Jimmy still thought Cold was breathtaking.

"I'm Dr. Madeline Queen, who are you?" the doctor asked briskly, staring Jimmy down.

"Jimmy," he croaked in response, still petting Cold's forehead.

"He's with Cold," Jules grunted, as if to vouch for his presence.

Queen looked less than impressed, saying shortly, "Remain up there and out of my way, and you can stay. Interfere at all, and I'll drag you out myself, got it?"

"Got it," Jimmy replied quietly.

Her gloved fingers pressed around the wounds, prompting Cold to gasp and moan. "Bullets only grazed him. Lucky; just an inch more to the right and they would have hit his liver," she mused. "We have to get this bleeding under control."

*Just an inch*, she'd said, those words hitting Jimmy hard in the gut. They were the words his father always said to comfort him when he visited him in prison—just an inch of glass separated them, just an inch. Jimmy had never expected those words to carry such added weight. Cold could have died. After all they had built together, an inch would have ended it.

Abigail had already gotten the two IVs going, one in Cold's arm and the other in the back of his hand. Blood and clear fluid pumped away, and she drew up a syringe of medication to push into the line.

"Ready, Doctor," she said tensely.

“Go ahead, right now,” Queen barked. “And give me two sets of hemostats and suture.”

Abigail scrambled to supply the requested tools, and Jimmy had to look away while she worked. He kept his eyes focused on Cold’s face, watching him slip in and out of consciousness, grunting in pain as Queen sewed up his wounds. Jimmy kept dabbing his brow, trying to stay strong, trying not to cry when Cold finally passed out.

The Gentlemen were all here now, lining the doorway like mourners at a funeral, all watching silently as Queen worked to save their leader. Rowena was a softly blubbering mess, Jules’ strong arms holding her tight and murmuring something in her ear to comfort her. Jerry had his hands clasped together, praying softly in French. Lorre looked grim, and Tamerlane hugged him close. Pym kept wiping his eyes and adjusting his glasses, prompting Thirdsies to lean affectionately against his shoulder. Valdemar had grown tired of standing and had flopped onto the floor, holding his face in his hands.

The fear was thick, making the air hard to breathe. Jimmy couldn’t take it any longer, finally letting himself cry, bowing his head and whispering in Cold’s ear, “You can’t leave. You can’t. They all need you. I need you... please. I need you so much. I love you, Rod.”

“Jimmy, right?” Queen asked quickly.

“Yes?”

“Please keep your sweet little love confessions to yourself right now,” she sighed in annoyance. “I need to concentrate.”

“Sorry,” Jimmy said with a grimace, falling silent.

After what felt like hours, Queen had finally finished her work and was suturing the last of Cold’s wounds closed. Abigail helped her roll him over to clean up all the remaining blood and apply a thick bandage. Then she stripped off her bloody gloves, handing them off to Abigail to dispose of along with the soiled instruments.

Waving at Jimmy, she ordered, “Come on, Casanova. Make yourself useful.”

Jimmy gently slid off the bed, helping Queen pull a fresh sheet over Cold. Underneath its cover, she pulled off the last of Cold's bloody clothing, leaving him naked underneath. She passed the mess over to Abigail, who quickly made it vanish.

Abigail removed the IVs, placing small bandages over the sites while Queen watched her carefully.

"Want some free advice, lover boy?" Queen asked, glancing away from Abigail's work and quirking a finely manicured brow.

"What?" Jimmy asked softly.

"All that deathbed goopy love shit?" Queen replied briskly. "If it was important enough for you to say then, make sure you remember to say it when he can hear you."

Jimmy gulped. He had told Rod he loved him. He loved him so very much.

Smiling weakly, he said, "Thanks. I will."

Queen turned her head, addressing the other Gentlemen as well. "He'll be fine. He'll be weak from the blood loss, but he'll recover. I've given him antibiotics to ward off any possible infection and left enough painkillers to take out a few horses." She looked back at Jimmy. "Keep the wounds clean, check for any signs of infection, and keep him on strict bedrest. Or at least in bed."

"Got it," Jimmy said eagerly, wiping at his eyes.

"Call me if you need me," she said curtly, cutting her eyes at Jules as she asked, "I expect my usual house call fee?"

"Done and done, Doc," Jules replied with a smirk.

Crawling back into bed beside Cold, Jimmy hated how the tarp crinkled as he moved but was desperate to be close to him. He watched as all the Gentlemen came by to pay their respects, a nod or small murmur.

None of them touched him except Rowena who bent down to kiss his forehead, sniffling at Jimmy, "You take care of him, okay? I'm right down the hall if you need me."

Jimmy took her hand and squeezed it tight. “Don’t worry, I will. I promise.”

Rowena tried to smile, but the tears wouldn’t stop coming and she left quickly, Pym gently offering his arm to guide her out. Lorre and Tamerlane followed, Thirdsies and Valdemar soon after. Jerry and Jules helped Abigail take down the light and clean up while Queen supervised. It was that moment when Jimmy realized there was one Gentleman missing.

Corman wasn’t here.

Not that Jimmy was unhappy about that. Of all the Gentlemen, Corman bothered him the most. Just thinking about how he had looked at him that night at the club made his skin crawl with a fresh batch of heebie jeebies.

“Nice work, Doc,” Jules rumbled as the last of the makeshift operating room was packed away. “We appreciate it. Cold is mighty important to us.”

“Trust me. He’ll be fine,” Queen said with a warm smile that seemed unusual for her given her cold bedside manner.

Maybe it was a special smile, Jimmy thought, reserved just for Jules, considering the way it made him grin like a little schoolboy.

Jerry didn’t seem to be a fan of the situation, casting a longing gaze toward Queen. He quickly insinuated himself between them, asking sweetly, “*Mademoiselle* Queen, please tell me what can I do to assist you?”

“Could you help Abigail carry out the equipment?” Queen replied shortly. “Thank you, you’re such a dear.”

“Anything for you, *mademoiselle*,” Jerry said with a warm smile, giving Jules a nasty glare before he obediently left with Abigail.

For once, Jules had no responding glare for Jerry, too focused on Queen as he reached for her hand and gently pressed a kiss to it. “You’re one hell of a broad, Doc.”

Queen actually blushed, laughing quietly, “Why, thank you, Mr. Price.”

“When ya gonna let me take you out,” Jules asked, still holding her hand. “Let me thank you proper like.”

“Oh, never,” she teased softly. “I don’t date my patients.”

“You ain’t doctorin’ on me right now,” Jules protested with a charming smile, “but we could play doctor later if ya’d like.”

“On the first date?” Queen pretended to be aghast. “What kind of girl do you take me for?”

“The kind that don’t give a fuck what nobody else thinks,” Jules answered honestly. “The kind that might be interested in having a real good time with me.”

“Hmmm, guess we’ll never know,” Queen sighed dramatically. “Face it, Mr. Price; I’d fall asleep, and you’d fall in love.”

Jules didn’t have a response to that, finally releasing his hold and grumbling in defeat. Jimmy was starting to think it was already too late for him.

Queen stood up on her toes, placing a chaste kiss on his cheek. “Take care of yourself, Mr. Price.”

“Bye, Doc,” Jules sighed longingly, watching her leave. He shook his head, mumbling to himself, “Damn, that’s one hell of a fuckin’ woman.”

Jimmy tried to subtly get into a more comfortable position, but the tarp didn’t allow for any silent movement.

Jules perked up when he heard Jimmy fidgeting, approaching the bedside to check on them. “You take care of him, you hear?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be here. Crashin’ out on the couch. You need me, holler.”

“I will,” Jimmy assured him. He watched Jules lumber about and turn off all the lights, shutting the bedroom doors carefully.

Stretching out beside Cold as close as he dared, Jimmy shut his eyes and tried to rest. He listened to the soft sounds of Cold’s breathing, drifting off into a restless sleep. It was still dark outside when Cold’s touch woke him up.

“Rod? Are you okay?” Jimmy stirred, clicking on the small lamp at his bedside.

“Jimmy?” Cold’s voice was raspy, but his eyes were clear when he opened them, scanning around the room before settling back on him.

“I’m here, Rod,” Jimmy said, gently taking his hand and kissing it.

“Mmm, come here to me,” Cold commanded, his voice stronger now, reaching up to pull Jimmy into a surprisingly passionate kiss.

“Mmmph, Rod,” Jimmy mumbled, blushing all over as Cold’s tongue slid into his mouth. He tried to pull away to catch his breath, but Cold wouldn’t let him budge, kissing him even more deeply.

Cold’s grip was firm, tugging Jimmy right on top of him and sliding the robe off of his shoulders. Jimmy tried to be mindful of the large bandage on his side, but it was hard to think straight when he could feel Cold’s hot flesh pressed against his. There was absolutely nothing between them now, and Cold felt so incredibly good.

His skin was soft, his hair tickling a little when their stomachs pressed together, and Jimmy was so grateful that Cold finally trusted him enough to be this vulnerable with him. Maybe it was also because of the drugs, but Jimmy wasn’t going to let this chance pass him by.

Cold’s hands squeezed and clawed at him, checking every inch to make sure everything was right as he had left it. Jimmy kept his hands patiently pressed up beside Cold’s shoulders, not yet touching in return. He knew he needed to wait. He didn’t want to push Cold too far, not after all they had been through.

Feeling Cold’s hard cock urgently pressing against him, Jimmy was amazed Cold was able to find such passion while wounded. “Rod,” he gasped when Cold’s long fingers began parting his cheeks, sliding along his hole and back behind his balls. “You’re hurt.”

Cold growled softly in response, grabbing for Jimmy’s hand and planting it firmly on his chest. His eyes were full of need, pleading up at Jimmy as he breathed, “Touch me.”

Jimmy moaned loudly at the command, eager to comply. He pressed against Cold’s skin, dragging through the hair on his chest and savoring the

scratching sound it made. He could feel the firm muscle beneath his palm and squeezed happily.

Being allowed to touch so openly, to see the faint smile curling Cold's lips, this was absolutely heaven. He had to kiss that smile, taste him, their tongues sliding together as he continued to explore. He touched and petted and groaned when Cold's fingers began to press inside of him.

"Rod," he whined, "we shouldn't..."

"Jimmy," Cold whined back, mocking Jimmy's concerned tone before switching to his most seductive drawl. "You're going to ride my cock; nice and slow until I come in you, and if I'm satisfied, I'll let you come, too."

"Fuck," Jimmy panted.

"Mmhmm," Cold purred, nodding toward the drawer. "Get yourself ready for me."

Jimmy leaned across him, fumbling to grab the lube. His hands were shaking as he slicked himself up and quickly fucked his fingers into himself with a grunt.

Watching his face intently, Cold ghosted a hand over his thrusting fingers, feeling what he was doing. His tongue ran over his lips, hungry but patient, purring, "Good boy."

Jimmy beamed at the praise, his head tipping back as he opened himself up. He moaned quietly when he hit the right angle to make his legs shake.

"Just wait until I'm all healed up," Cold taunted. "I'll take you apart myself, piece by piece. Tie you to the bed again, take hours stretching you out... Would you like that, Jimmy?"

"God, yes, sir," Jimmy whimpered eagerly.

It wasn't long before Jimmy was whimpering and needed more than fingers to fill him, lifting his hips as Cold lined his cock up. Jimmy slowly lowered himself down, moaning and gasping as his body stretched. The angle made Cold's already thick girth seem almost impossible, and Jimmy rocked his hips a few times as he struggled to make it all fit.

When Cold was finally fully sheathed inside his body, they held each other, savoring the connection and panting softly. Jimmy kissed him tenderly, their bodies pressed flush together as he slowly started to move.

“There,” Cold sighed, sounding relieved and content. “Just like that... just like that.”

Jimmy was careful, every thrust threatening to make him scream outright from the intensity. Cold had a hand digging into his hip, guiding their rhythm, keeping it slow and passionate as he dragged Jimmy down for another kiss. Jimmy never wanted to stop kissing him, drunk on the flavor and his lips soon raw from the sweet friction.

He kept rolling his hips under Cold’s firm guidance, his hands dragging back over his chest, careful not to stray too far down his stomach. It was getting harder not to take more, desperate for more sensation but striving to be obedient.

Cold seemed to be having the same struggle, soon arching his back and flexing his hips for Jimmy to take his cock deeper. “Yes,” he hissed, fighting through the pain that crossed his face to start thrusting into him. “Fuck...”

Pushing himself up, Jimmy pressed his hands firmly on Cold’s chest to hold him in place. “Rod... let me. Let me take care of you.”

“Jimmy,” Cold grumbled.

“I’ve got you,” Jimmy promised, starting to rock his body with more purpose, sitting almost straight up and balancing himself on Cold’s cock. It was almost too much to handle in this position, his head falling back as he groaned, but he was determined to do this.

Jimmy rolled the entire line of his body into every slam, crying out passionately as he moved. He let his hips do all the work, riding Cold hard, dragging his fingers down his stomach and giving him everything he had.

Cold’s hand grabbed Jimmy’s, tangling them together as he gazed reverently up at him. Jimmy had never felt more beautiful than at that moment being the sole focus of Cold’s awestruck stare.

“Close,” Cold sighed, panting harder and louder than he ever had before. He was sweating all over, grunting as Jimmy fucked down on his cock.

“Come on,” Jimmy pleaded. “I want your cum, please.”

Cold growled at that, his body tensing beneath Jimmy. “Fuck,” he hissed, grabbing for Jimmy’s cock and stroking him hastily. “You’ve been so good. Come with me, now.”

Jimmy whimpered, thrusting into Cold’s hand as he desperately sought to take them both over the edge. When it came, it wasn’t a sudden drop. It was a warm and soothing wave of pleasure, feeling Cold pulsing deep inside of him as he released into his palm, moaning and shuddering together. Jimmy could feel the tingles of ecstasy setting every nerve in his body ablaze with sensation, struggling to keep the feeling going for as long as he could.

His heart had never felt so full, eyes wet with tears and overwhelmed knowing he could have lost Cold today.

*Just an inch*, Queen had said.

As the last few tremors were leaving him, Jimmy looked down at Cold and had to release some of the emotions threatening to choke him. He swallowed back a thick cry, gasping passionately, “I love you.”

Cold looked terrified, trapped by those powerful words with no way to respond. He had to pull Jimmy down into his arms, had to kiss the sobs right out of his mouth, holding him close and nearly crushing him. “Oh, Jimmy,” he sighed. “I know... fuck, I know.”

Clinging to him tightly, Jimmy sobbed against his chest as he let it all out, whimpering, “I love you so much, Rod.”

“I know,” Cold soothed, gently rubbing Jimmy’s back, peppering his face with sweet little kisses. He held Jimmy as if he was afraid he might disappear, keeping him close long after his cock slid out and they were both a cold, sticky mess.

Cold didn’t need to say it back. Jimmy could feel it in his tender kisses, the stroke of his hand across his spine. He knew Cold loved him, too.

Releasing Jimmy long enough for him to grab a damp washcloth to clean them up, Cold protested lightly, “This is supposed to be my job.”

“I can take care of you sometimes,” Jimmy said with a loving smile, sliding back into bed beside him and snuggling against his uninjured side.

Cold grunted at that, lazily winding his arm around Jimmy. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “Hmmph. We’ll see about that.”

Jimmy smiled softly, his hand gently wandering up Cold’s chest. He found a particularly intricate scar that looked like a jagged bolt of lightning, tracing it with the tip of his finger.

“Beer bottle,” Cold said quietly. “Twelve.”

“You were twelve?” Jimmy repeated.

“Mmm.”

Jimmy’s fingers traveled up to the large scar that rippled across Cold’s breast.

“Ah, decided I was going to be daring and get my nipple pierced when I was seventeen,” Cold snorted. “Boris tore it out. Got infected. Never healed right.”

Jimmy grimaced, moving his hand down to touch the other large scar that stretched across Cold’s side.

“First time Marco Luchesi told me to use my mouth on him and I refused,” Cold said, his eyes closing softly.

Jimmy froze, his insides clenching in sympathy.

“Ironic thing about the Luchesis,” Cold drawled bitterly. “They’re quick to bash someone for being gay, but they’re not real picky about where they put their dicks if they don’t think anyone will find out.”

“I’m so sorry, Rod,” Jimmy said quietly. Sorry didn’t seem right. It didn’t seem like a strong enough word to convey how much his heart hurt to know how Cold had suffered.

“I’m only sorry I didn’t refuse sooner.”

“How old...?”

“Sixteen was the last time,” Cold replied. “Ten was the first.”

“Christ,” Jimmy muttered, cuddling closer as if he could leach out all those bad memories with his embrace. Realization began to creep over him, and he exclaimed, “Holy crap. I’ve been such an asshole to you.”

“Hmm?”

“After everything you’ve been through, and I’ve been pushing you so hard,” Jimmy clarified, peering owlishly up at Cold. “You know. To be more... physical. I should have known. I mean, at the least I should have been more respectful. And the kissing, I had no right—”

“While I do appreciate that and hope this new knowledge allows you to make more respectful decisions in the future,” Cold said quickly, “I don’t need your pity. It was all a very long time ago.” His eyes flickered open to appraise Jimmy with a smug smile. “You hadn’t even been born yet.”

“Still, I’m sorry.” Jimmy rolled his eyes, scoffing, “And come on. You’re not that old.”

“How old do you think I am, Jimmy?” Cold asked, amused.

“Uh... Thirtyish something?”

“Flatterer,” Cold snorted. “I’m going to be forty-five on Friday.”

“Forty... wow,” Jimmy gasped, honestly quite surprised. He did some quick math, grinning. “You’re nineteen years older than me.”

“Mmhmm. Why are you smiling like that?”

“It’s just something about that damn number,” Jimmy laughed. “I swear, it’s been following me. Just seems fitting.”

“Oh?”

“Like the universe is telling me this is exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

Cold smiled at that, kissing Jimmy’s forehead. “Mmm, maybe it is.”

“Yeah?”

“Or maybe you’re just crazy.”

“That, too.”

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# Chapter Twenty-Two

Jimmy woke up in Cold’s arms, smiling brightly to have his boyfriend curled around him. In all of their time together, this was the first time he hadn’t woken up alone. He took full advantage, snuggling close and burying his head against the crook of Cold’s shoulder.

“Mmm, morning,” Cold mumbled, peeking open an eye to peer down at Jimmy.

“Good morning,” Jimmy chirped, his hand lightly resting on Cold’s stomach. “How do you feel?”

“Like someone shot me,” came the droll reply.

“Want your medicine?” Jimmy asked, glancing to the bottles Dr. Queen had left for him on the bedside table.

“Not yet. I need to think.”

“About last night?” Jimmy asked carefully. “Tamerlane and Jules said there’s, uh, a rat?”

“Absolutely there is,” Cold said with a faint scowl. “Someone has been working very hard to start another war between the Gentlemen and the Luchesis.”

“I noticed Corman wasn’t here last night,” Jimmy said, biting at his lower lip.

“Mmm,” Cold hummed lightly. “His loyalty is questionable at best. I’ve long suspected he’s up to something, but I need proof.”

“Why? Can’t you just...” Jimmy made a little finger gun motion with his hand. “You know, bang bang.”

Cold actually laughed, though the wince that followed showed he regretted it. “It’s more complicated than that. Corman has a lot of powerful connections in the city, judges and things like that. Very useful things I don’t want to lose if I don’t have to. I must be absolutely sure before I make a move against him.”

“Well, what kind of proof do you need?”

“Something more than my gut. I trust my instincts,” Cold said, “and yes, my instincts say it’s Corman, but I need concrete evidence. There’s been too much that’s happened now for it to be a coincidence. The police finding Dickie’s body so quickly, the timely returns of the Luchesis to the city, the attack at the club, the meeting going bad last night... Corman knows that I suspect him.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because once he saw I wasn’t dead, he ran,” Cold drawled. “Above all else, he’s a coward. He only joined the Gentlemen when he was absolutely sure the Luchesis were going to lose the war. But being a coward doesn’t make him guilty.”

“But why start so much shit? Is he trying to get back with the Luchesis? Join their cause?”

“Possibly,” Cold mused, “but Italians never forget. Corman already betrayed them once, they wouldn’t trust him.”

“Not unless he did something to prove himself,” Jimmy said, his eyes bright with conspiracy theories rattling his brain. “Like setting you up to take the fall for Dickie’s murder. Everybody thinks it was you anyway, right? Even your own Gentlemen do. If he figured out where the body was, maybe he’s the one who snitched to the cops so they’d come after you. If he promised the Luchesis he could get you out of the way for them, that would be a hell of a way to prove his loyalty.”

“Look at you, Nancy Drew,” Cold laughed softly.

“Well. It makes sense.” Jimmy blushed.

“So...” Cold tilted his head, thinking for a long moment. “What else?”

“What?”

“Keep going. Corman tells the Luchesis he can get me thrown in jail. He tells the cops about the body. But the cops still don’t have enough to make an arrest and I don’t go anywhere. So what next?”

“Well, you said something about the Luchesis coming back to the city,” Jimmy said, sitting up a little. “Maybe they were getting tired of waiting on Corman to deliver results, and decided to make a move on their own. So they come back, organize the attacks. It wasn’t just the club, right? Some couriers were hit?”

Cold rolled his eyes, reserving comment on Jimmy’s obvious eavesdropping.

“And the couriers were Corman’s, so, either he was in on it,” Jimmy went on, the gears in his brain spinning rapidly, “or the Luchesis specifically targeted his guys to send a message to him for not being able to deliver yet.”

“Possibly,” Cold agreed. “And the attack last night?”

“I would need to know what the meeting was about,” Jimmy replied sweetly, batting his eyes.

Cold snorted, playfully bumping against Jimmy. “Hmmm. Well, I can tell you that I’ve been in contact with Matteo Luchesi since the attacks. Smiled at his apologies and his bullshit. Promised him the return of his father’s ring for a peaceful little sit down.”

“Okay, and they already think you killed Rafaello Luchesi, right?”

“Mmmm, I told him it was a recent acquisition.”

“Let’s say it was Corman who set up the attack on the meeting. He wants to get you out of the way for the Luchesis to move in. And he’s already betrayed them once before, so maybe he just wants everybody to go away now? Take over the city himself?”

“Not bad,” Cold said with an approving nod. “You’d make a decent detective if the lawyer gig doesn’t pan out, Mr. Poe.”

Jimmy laughed, shaking his head. “I’ve probably just been watching way too many movies. I mean, if I was a real detective, I’d know how Rafaello’s ring ended up in my mother’s jewelry box.”

“How indeed,” Cold said mysteriously.

“Why won’t you tell me?” Jimmy pouted.

“Because I’m not sure I’m right yet,” Cold answered honestly. “And to help you, to help your father, I have to be absolutely sure.”

Jimmy nodded but couldn’t hide his disappointment. He stared off for a while, hesitating for a long moment. “I still think about her all the time,” he admitted quietly. “Do you... do you ever think about your mom?”

“Sometimes,” Cold replied softly, “but it’s hard to think about someone you never met.”

“I saw her pictures. She was freakin’ beautiful.” Jimmy smiled, adding kindly, “You look so much like her.”

Cold seemed pleased with that, noting, “Mmm, definitely didn’t inherit the talent, that’s for sure. Did your mother sing?”

“All the time,” Jimmy said with a grin. “And God, she was so gorgeous. Like, I always used to think she looked like a movie star.”

“Mmm.”

“I have pictures,” Jimmy said, trying not to sound too eager.

“Let’s see,” Cold chuckled softly, clearly amused by Jimmy’s excitement.

Jimmy bounced off the bed to pick up the shoebox, grinning as he held it tightly to his chest. He took out the jewelry box, lovingly setting it on the bedside table before crawling back under the blankets with Cold.

Flipping through photographs, he finally settled on one of him and his mother at a picnic, offering it out shyly for Cold’s inspection. “That’s me and my mom.”

Cold quirked a brow, noting, “She’s very beautiful, Jimmy... and this is you next to her? You *were* blond...”

“Thanks,” Jimmy gushed. “And yeah! My hair was super light when I was a kid. It started getting darker, eh, around seventh grade I think.” He kept flipping through pictures, finding a portrait from his Little League days.

“Huh,” Cold said, curiously glancing over the photograph.

“Yeah, and you see my jersey number?” Jimmy grinned. “Nineteen. See, it’s really like my lucky number. I only had nineteen cents in my pocket the day we met. I’ll never forget that. Oh, and Rowena shot Dickie nineteen times; well, I don’t know if I should count that or not, but eh, still nineteen.”

Cold had the strangest look on his face, still staring at the young picture of Jimmy.

“What? Is my number story not exciting enough for you?” Jimmy teased.

Cold looked up at him, saying slowly, “Jimmy...”

“Yes?”

“I know who killed your mother.” There was not a shred of doubt in his eyes.

Still, Jimmy scoffed, “Come on.”

Cold didn’t say anything.

“You’re serious. Well... who?”

Closing his eyes, Cold took a deep breath and gently grasped Jimmy’s hand. “I can’t tell you.”

“What the hell, Rod?” Jimmy jerked his hand away, hurt and confused. “You just suddenly somehow magically figured out who killed my mother, and you won’t freakin’ tell me?”

Cold reached for Jimmy’s hand again, his voice soothing as he tried to explain himself. “Jimmy. Do you want to get your father out of prison?”

“Of course I do,” Jimmy fussed, desperate to understand. “But what does that have to do with—”

“Everything,” Cold said quickly. His eyes were actually pleading, a quality Jimmy had never seen before with Cold.

“I don’t understand.”

“I need you to trust me. And I am going to invite Detective Duplin over as soon as possible.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jimmy snapped, his voice hitting a particularly shrill note.

“No,” Cold said stubbornly, “he has his part to play in all of this. If we’re going to get justice for your mother and save your father, we need Detective Duplin’s assistance. We need proof.”

“He’s not gonna help,” Jimmy scoffed.

Cold smiled slyly. “Oh, yes, he will. I’m going to make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

“Too early to be quoting *The Godfather*,” came a loud grumble from the other side of the door.

“Good morning, Jules,” Cold chuckled.

Jules pushed open the bedroom door and lumbered in, a little tousled from sleep. He had changed out of his bloody clothes, wearing sweats and a thin tank top that stretched over his broad chest.

“What? No breakfast in bed for the patient?” Cold pouted at his friend.

“Fuck you. You can get it yourself. I know you’re feeling fine ‘cause I had to fuckin’ lay there and listen to you givin’ it to Twig last night.”

Jimmy’s face flooded a spectacular shade of red. “Wait, you, you were out there? In the den?”

“I said I was crashin’ on the couch,” Jules replied. “What fuckin’ couch did you think I meant?”

“Not that one!” Jimmy groaned.

Cold grinned, warmer than Jimmy had seen before, and laughed softly to himself.

“So. What’s the word, Boss?” Jules asked, quick to get to the business at hand. They had just been attacked for the second time. They had to make a move. The giant was obviously antsy for direction.

“Get Tamerlane and Lorre, see if they can find our good friend Corman,” Cold commanded sternly, that particular tone making Jimmy shiver.

“Detective Duplin is going to be paying us a visit today. If I’m right, we have a beautiful opportunity to end the war and take out the trash at the same time.”

“Think Corman’s turned?” Jules said bluntly.

Cold glanced at Jimmy, his eyes flickering back to Jules, replying carefully, “I think it’s safe to say he’s no longer our friend.”

“Got it,” Jules rumbled. “What do you need me to do?”

“Keep everyone calm,” Cold ordered. “I have a plan. Tell them this will all be over by Friday. I still have the ring, and I’m sure Matteo Luchesi will agree to another meeting. If Tamerlane and Lorre can’t locate Corman, tell them not to worry. I expect we’ll be seeing him again soon.”

“You got it, Boss.” Jules nodded, smirking softly as he added, “Don’t fuck yourself up gettin’ your fuck on, all right?”

Jimmy’s blush blazed bright while Cold snorted in reply, “I’ll be fine. Worry more about our crew and less about my dick.”

Jules cackled to himself as he left, the doors slamming shut in his wake.

Stretching his legs and grimacing, Cold eyed Jimmy with a playful smirk. “Well, I need to take a shower...”

Jimmy expectantly began to move out of the way, blinking when Cold’s gaze lingered.

“Join me?” he asked, scanning his eyes over Jimmy with a wicked smile.

“Oh, God, yes.”

The shower was more than enough to accommodate two grown men, and it was wonderful to share such an intimate ritual with Cold. Soap and lathering hands quickly turned to hot kisses, and their fingers tangled together as Cold pressed Jimmy against the tile. It was slow, passionate, and Jimmy never wanted to leave the bathroom.

When they were finally finished, Jimmy helped Cold dry off and change his bandages. Cold helped place a fresh dressing on Jimmy’s arm as well.

“Look at us and our matching gunshot wounds.” Jimmy laughed.

Cold rolled his eyes, and kissed all the giggles right from Jimmy’s lips.

They got dressed, Cold taking his time and insisting he didn’t need any help. Jimmy finally asked what side of the closet he could use for his things, and Cold snorted, pointing to another door. Jimmy had always assumed it led to an office, delighted to find it was another massive walk-in closet, completely empty and just for him.

They ate a late breakfast, entertained by Jules and Jerry screaming at each other in a broken mix of English and French. Jules kept snatching food away, and as best as Jimmy could make out, Jerry was threatening to put his spatula where no spatula should ever go.

Rowena joined them, smothering her brother with kisses and tearful hugs, joining in the barrage of spatula threats if Cold ever made her worry like that again.

Jules and Cold talked amongst themselves for a while, and Rowena got ready to leave for the club. Cold made a few phone calls, rejoining Jimmy at the table when he was done and Jules had left.

“Detective Duplin is on his way,” Cold informed him, his demeanor becoming distant and firm. “You don’t have to be here when I talk to him.”

“I want to be,” Jimmy said stubbornly. “Especially if it has to do with my mother. I deserve to know.”

“As you wish,” Cold replied with a small shrug. He pressed a chaste kiss to Jimmy’s forehead, reminding him, “You probably won’t like what I say to him. Or what he says to me. Remember who this is for.”

“You?” Jimmy replied dryly. “I know you want Augustus to leave you alone __”

“And I want to help your father, for you,” Cold smoothly cut in. “It’s for both of us.”

Jimmy nodded, fidgeting as Cold led him to the living room. He left briefly to bring in a large box, dropping it down next to the coffee table. He sat in a plush chair, neatly crossing his legs and leisurely leaning back.

He looked like a king preparing to hold court, Jimmy clumsily plopping down on the sofa next to him. He was surprisingly nervous. He and Augustus hadn't parted on the best of terms, and while he knew Cold had special ways of being persuasive, he still didn't think he would able to convince Augustus to help them.

They only had to wait a few more minutes before Augustus arrived, looking around the room with a sneer. He didn't seem to want to touch anything, as if the very furniture was covered in a thin veil of slime. Looking between Jimmy and Cold, he snapped, "Well. I'm here."

"Thank you for coming," Cold purred graciously, gesturing for Augustus to have a seat across from him.

"You said Jimmy needed help," Augustus said shortly, getting right to the point. He hesitated, but finally sat down. "That's the only reason I came."

"I'd like to make a deal, Detective," Cold said, smiling slyly.

"Ha, you mean like the one you have with Jimmy?"

"Hmmm, know about that, do you?"

"Yeah, Anna told me all about your sick little arrangement," Augustus said, his tone dripping with disgust. "What you did to Jimmy because you wanted to get me to drop the investigation."

"Mmm, did she now," Cold snorted, cutting his eyes at Jimmy.

Okay, so maybe he shouldn't have told Anna, Jimmy conceded with a grimace. He should have known she would tell Augustus what they had talked about. He wanted to explain that there wasn't technically any deal anymore, that he and Cold were really a couple now, but he kept his teeth together.

"Yeah," Augustus spat heatedly, "and you know what? I've got a deal for you, Legrand. Let Jimmy go, let him walk away from this, and I won't bring you up on prostitution charges. How's that?"

Cold looked thoughtful again, his lips curling into a calculating pout, as he uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. "No."

“No?” Augustus scoffed.

“I have a much better idea. How about you drop your little murder investigation, I get to keep Jimmy and continue doing whatever I want to him. In exchange, I don’t turn you into the authorities for tampering with evidence. I think that would be much more helpful to Jimmy, plus you get to avoid several felonies.”

“What evidence?” Augustus demanded. His eyes were wide, and Jimmy could see a twinkle of fear.

“Before I met Jimmy, I took the time to do my research,” Cold said carefully. “I never do anything without being fully prepared. Background check, known associates, the works. I also read the case file that’s currently on record with the SSPD for Eliza Poe’s murder. Read every detail. Funny, though. The official report says he was asleep at the time of his mother’s murder. Imagine my surprise when Jimmy told me he saw the whole thing. How curious.”

Sweat began to bead along Augustus’ brow, but he said nothing, so Cold continued.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of Geemaw,” Cold drawled. “Very lovely lady, fabulous baker. Did you know she made copies of every file she ever transcribed for the SSPD while she worked there? Wasn’t hard to get a copy of the original report. You know, the report that’s in your handwriting that includes Jimmy’s original testimony and eyewitness account of his mother’s tragic death.”

Augustus’ jaw was tight.

“And yet,” Cold gasped, clicking his tongue as he spread the file out across the table between them, “you went on and filed the report a second time, but this time your story had changed. All trace of Jimmy witnessing the crime had been removed.”

“I was trying to protect Jimmy,” Augustus said quietly, glaring harshly at Cold.

“Oh, one second,” Cold said, reaching down into the box next to him. “See, I thought you might say that.” He brought out a stack of files, a dozen at

least, dropping them down on the table with a loud slam. “Were you trying to protect Jimmy when you altered all of these reports, too?”

“You motherfucker...” Augustus leaned back in his chair.

Cold looked triumphant, saying sweetly, “I decided to stop at nineteen, seemed like a good number.” He smiled over at Jimmy before turning his icy gaze back on Augustus. “In at least nineteen cases, I can prove that you altered evidence to make arrests.”

“Every single one of those men were guilty,” Augustus challenged passionately. “They were lowlife scumbags, just like you, who had managed to beat the system over and over again. Everything I did was to ensure justice would be served.”

“And David Poe? He was another scumbag? And you just had to make sure that justice would be carried out? Or did you have some additional motivation?”

“What are you implying?” Augustus snapped.

“Back in the day, the Luchesi family made several, hmmm, contributions to the Strassen Springs Police Department.” Cold chuckled fondly. “Some of the names in those files looked awfully familiar to me. I began to notice a rather distinct pattern.”

“Fuck you, Legrand.”

“I’ll pass, but how about you tell me about Eliza Poe. Did you or did you not receive compensation to tamper with the investigation?”

“Even if I did,” Augustus raged, “it wouldn’t change the facts. David murdered his wife, I know it.”

Jimmy squirmed, Augustus’ anger pulsing the very air in the room.

“How can you be so sure?” Cold pushed, never flinching.

“Because Eliza called me the night she was murdered.”

The oxygen all seemed to drain away, Jimmy left gasping as he stared at Augustus. “She... called you?” Not once in all these years had Augustus

ever mentioned his mother calling him. Jimmy's eyes began to sting with tears. "She called you! She called you, and you never told me?"

"You didn't need to know," Augustus said firmly even as his lip began to twitch.

"Oh, but I think he does," Cold snarled. "If you don't tell us right now, I will take this beautiful pile of evidence to the nearest news station. I'll even be kind enough to take it to the one your daughter works at. I'm sure she would love that."

Augustus tilted his head skyward, blinking back tears.

"Hmmm, 'Detective Takes Mob Moolah To Make Unlawful Arrests,'" Cold suggested. "I think that's a good headline, don't you? Oh, well. I suppose we should let daughter dearest pick it out."

"Fine," Augustus hissed. He was trapped, speaking slowly and defining each syllable as he called on old memories, saying, "She called me from the house. Phone at the jewelry shop was out again. She started to complain about a customer who had been giving her a hard time..."

"I've seen the files. There was a robbery the same night she was murdered," Cold interjected sharply. "Was it—"

"No, that was after Eliza was killed, and only one item was taken," Augustus said, miffed at being interrupted.

Cold scowled, flicking his fingers in annoyance for Augustus to continue.

"She called me. Some customer had been a jerk, and I heard Jimmy in the background," Augustus went on, his eyes moving toward him, mournful and sad. "I could hear Jimmy, how excited he was, calling out, 'Daddy's home! Hey, Daddy's here!' And... and that's when Eliza started screaming." He closed his eyes, tears falling freely down his face.

Jimmy's heart had twisted into a knot, hanging on Augustus' every word. That wasn't right. He didn't remember his father coming home before his mother was killed. That didn't happen until after it was already too late.

"Eliza started screaming, 'It's him, Augustus! It's him!' Jimmy was crying, he was crying so much." Augustus took a deep breath, his shoulders

shaking as a decades-old weight was finally lifted. “Jimmy kept crying, crying, ‘No, Daddy! No!’ Eliza was screaming for Jimmy to run. And the line went dead. That was the last time I ever heard her voice.”

Jimmy was frozen, he couldn’t breathe. It couldn’t be true. That’s not what happened. David wasn’t there. He wasn’t. Jimmy started panting, his fingers digging into the arms of the chair.

The night started happening all over again in his head. He couldn’t take a breath in, trembling down to his bones as his memories played the horrible event on repeat in his brain.

He saw his mother being stabbed, he saw the Man in the White Coat standing over her with the knife. He knew it wasn’t David. He couldn’t see the man’s face, but he knew deep down in his soul that it wasn’t his father.

“When I saw David, he was wearing his doctor’s coat. A white coat,” Augustus went on, his voice shaking. “Jimmy was still crying about the man in a white coat when I got there... he was confused. He saw David killing his mother, and I don’t think his mind could handle it.”

“No,” Jimmy cried, shaking his head wildly.

“Jimmy,” Cold began, attempting to soothe and quiet him.

“No! That’s, that’s not what happened!” Jimmy yelled, trying to stand up, but the world jerked violently beneath his feet. All he could hear was his own shaky breathing and his pulse drumming louder and louder, drowning everything else out as his vision went dark.

He saw something, something new. Something shiny and flickering before him. A door. He knew it was a memory from his childhood because the doorknob was the wrong height. It was so high, too high. Through the glass of the door, bleary and out of focus, he could see a flash of bright white.

Daddy! It was Daddy! His younger self was so excited, giggling as he reached for the lock.

No.

No, no, no.

“The glass. It was foggy,” Jimmy stammered, his chest shuddering as sudden clarity stole away his breath. “I thought it was my dad. But, but it wasn’t! I let... oh, my God. I let him in. I let him in.”

“You let David in,” Augustus said, tense and uncertain.

“No,” Jimmy insisted, the memories flashing vividly before his eyes. He hadn’t even realized it, but Cold was suddenly right beside him, folding their hands together. “I thought it was. I did. That’s why I opened the door. But I was wrong.”

The memory continued to move forward, the Man in the White Coat brushing by him and going straight to his mother. They were arguing. The knife, where did he get the knife? It hit her in the stomach first, and that’s when Jimmy started to sob.

*No, Daddy.* Not Daddy at all. It wasn’t David, but why couldn’t Jimmy see his face? Why couldn’t he see who it was that was hurting his mom?

He let him in. *He let him in.*

Jimmy collapsed into Cold’s strong arms, sobbing hysterically. “It’s my fault... the Man in White... I let him in the house. I thought it was my dad. But it wasn’t. It wasn’t him!”

Augustus had the decency to look upset, but he was still clearly not convinced.

“Breathe, Jimmy,” Cold ordered, his tone firm and soothing. “It’s not your fault.”

Jimmy cried harder, trembling all over. Maybe Augustus was right... maybe David...

No! Jimmy forced himself to examine the memory, as painful as it was, looking at the white coat of the man who killed his mother. It wasn’t a doctor’s coat, no, it was a white suit jacket.

The memory was shaky, but he could remember when David came home and found him and his mother later. Yes, he was also wearing a white coat, but it had his name embroidered on it, still wet from the rain. Jimmy could

recall the damp feeling on his face when David hugged him close, much like the damp pressed against his cheek now from crying so much.

Jimmy slowly began to calm down, taking deep breaths. He didn't care what Augustus said. David didn't kill Eliza. There was another man there that night.

Holding Jimmy close, Cold gently rubbed his back, not even caring about the wetness Jimmy was leaving all over his shirt. He glanced back at Augustus expectantly, nodding for him to keep going.

"When the Luchesis contacted me to keep the case rock solid against David, I didn't even ask why," Augustus sighed, holding out his hands, looking at Jimmy without a hint of regret. "It wasn't the first time they'd asked me to do something like that... and everything I ever did helped put guilty men behind bars."

"All men who also happened to be enemies of the Luchesi family," Cold said dryly. "Except David Poe. You didn't find it odd?"

"If I ever asked questions, they'd start talking about what school Anna went to," Augustus said quietly. "I did what I had to do, and I was putting bad men in prison. When you took over, all of that stopped. I never heard from the Luchesis ever again."

"Who contacted you from the Luchesi family?" Cold demanded. "I need a name, Detective."

"Gregory Rees," Augustus replied defeatedly.

Cold's jaw twitched. He knew the name. His lips stretched in a mirthless smile, asking coyly, "Tell me, Detective Duplin. How would you like to help me catch a murderer?"

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# Chapter Twenty-Three

It took quite a bit of convincing for Augustus to accept Cold's deal. Augustus was immediately resistant, and Cold would not back down. Jimmy wished he had been privy to the entire conversation, but it soon got so heated that Cold asked Jimmy to leave the room.

Jimmy pouted, retreating from the yelling to the parlor at the front of the house. He hated that Cold didn't apparently trust him to know exactly what he was up to, sighing as he flopped into a chair.

He was still shocked by the mysterious phone call Augustus had been keeping a secret all this time. Now he understood why Augustus had been so convinced of David's guilt, but it still didn't change Jimmy's memory of what happened. He knew his father was innocent, so who was his mother talking about?

Augustus had mentioned something about a customer who had been harassing her at the jewelry shop, and then there was a robbery there the same night she was murdered. It couldn't be a coincidence. Jimmy was frustrated. It felt like the answer was right there, but he couldn't put it together.

He knew it had something to do with the ring from Don Rafaello. But what?

That name Augustus had said, Gregory Rees, definitely meant something to Cold. As soon as Augustus said it, the gangster's face had lit up like it was Christmas morning, but Jimmy was totally at Cold's mercy for any information, and none seemed to be forthcoming any time soon.

"Crap," Jimmy mumbled to himself, wishing he was an actual detective and could solve this mystery.

He looked up when he heard footsteps, standing to see who it was.

Augustus was walking by, pausing when he saw Jimmy. His face looked decades older, tired and sad. "Well," he said grimly, "I see you've made yourself right at home."

“Augustus.” Jimmy frowned, wringing his hands nervously. “I understand now why you thought it was my dad,” he began, slowly walking toward him. “I do. But there has to be another explanation—”

“Jimmy,” Augustus said, holding up his hands, “just stop.”

Jimmy’s heart sank.

“I’ve never claimed to be a perfect man,” Augustus sighed. “I know I’ve made mistakes. I’ve done plenty wrong, and I should probably let Cold turn me in. But... if I can do right by you and David...” His eyes began to water. “And by Eliza. If I can do right by her, then maybe God will forgive me for all my other sins.”

“Augustus,” Jimmy whimpered, wishing he could reach out and embrace him. The chasm between them was still too deep, and he couldn’t bring himself to cross it. There were too many years of pain and anger, but he managed to offer a small smile at least. “Does that mean you believe me?”

“It means... it means I’m willing to admit I may have been wrong,” Augustus said, his tone strained, “but Legrand is still the worst fucking monster I’ve ever met, and I will pray you wake up one day and see that for yourself before it’s too late.”

Jimmy blinked at the language, trying to respond. “But Augustus, he’s really not—”

“He’s a monster,” Augustus fiercely repeated, holding up a stern finger. “If you stay here with him, you’re a fool.” He didn’t give Jimmy a chance to reply, already heading toward the door.

Jimmy started after him, freezing when he saw Lorre and Tamerlane intercepting him.

“Hey there, Duplin,” Lorre said with a scowl, his eyes glittering with rage despite his calm tone.

Tamerlane walked behind Augustus, silent and watching him carefully.

“Hey, Lorre,” Augustus said, completely fearless. “Wanna get the hell out of my way?”

“You know, one of these days, I’m gonna get you for my brother,” Lorre warned.

“Well, that day is not today,” Augustus shot back with a wry smile.

“Maybe not,” Lorre replied, glancing over his shoulder and sharing a smirk with Tamerlane, “but damn is it good to see Cold made you his bitch.”

Augustus’ smile dropped.

“Have a great day, Detective,” Tamerlane said cheerfully, laughing as Lorre stepped aside to let Augustus leave.

Augustus gave Jimmy one last lingering stare before he walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Jimmy felt a hand on his waist, jumping and his heart starting to pound fearfully until he heard a familiar purr, “It’s only me.”

Whirling around to see Cold standing there, Jimmy laughed breathlessly. “I hate when you do that.”

“Mmm, I’ll avoid it in the future then,” Cold promised, gently touching Jimmy’s cheek. His expression became stern, looking to Tamerlane and Lorre. “Well?”

“Nothing,” Lorre said, scratching his chin. “His place is cleared out.”

“Snitch at that deli he likes says he’s still coming by lunch every day,” Tamerlane supplied. “So. He’s still in town. Want us to grab him today? Bring you back a meatball sub?”

“Change of plans,” Cold said with a smirk. “Corman doesn’t know it yet, but he’s going to help us get rid of the Luchesis.”

“Oh, is he?” Lorre chuckled.

“Mmmhmm,” Cold hummed without going into any more detail. He looked at Jimmy, saying, “I actually have a favor to ask of you.”

“Uhm, I guess it depends on what it is?” Jimmy said slowly. All of this cloak and dagger was certainly exciting, but he still had reservations about doing anything illegal.

“Go see that charming specimen, Maury the Mouth,” Cold said. “I need you to get a special receiver.”

“A receiver for receiving what exactly?”

“On Friday, we’re going to be working with our dear friend Detective Duplin,” Cold replied smoothly. “You’re still going to perform as scheduled, and you’re going to be wearing a wire that Duplin will supply. I need an additional receiver to hear the transmission, and I can’t let Duplin know what we’re doing. Do you understand?”

“How is that gonna help get my father out of jail?” Jimmy demanded, not even caring that he was getting uppity in front of Tamerlane and Lorre.

Cold’s hand moved to gently cup Jimmy’s neck, soothing, “You have to trust me.”

Jimmy closed his eyes, leaning into Cold’s touch. He wanted to argue, demand answers, but he knew it wouldn’t do him any good. “Fine,” he grumbled, “I’ll get the receiver thing.”

“Good boy,” Cold said, rewarding him with a kiss on his forehead. “Jerry will take you. Then you have rehearsal.”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy replied, emphasizing the ‘sir’ to make Cold smirk.

Cold nodded at Lorre and Tamerlane, the Gentlemen obediently following him into the back of the house. Jimmy watched them leave with a heavy sigh, then trudged toward the kitchen to find Jerry.

It was a relatively quiet ride over to Maury’s pawn shop, Jerry electing to stay in the car instead of joining Jimmy inside. He hurried through the door, bell ringing loudly as he called out, “Hey, Maury!”

“The fuck you want?” Maury bellowed from in the back, grumpy as ever.

“It’s Jimmy!”

“Ain’t you got a phone now?” Maury snorted, his voice getting louder as he made his way to the front. “You know, you can call a motherfucker instead of comin’ in here and botherin’ me.”

“I missed you, too,” Jimmy teased.

Maury came around the counter to give Jimmy a big hug, mindful of his wounded arm, laughing, “Yeah, yeah! How the fuck are ya, kid?”

“Holy crap, Maury! It’s been crazy!” Jimmy exclaimed, quickly launching into a recap of all the exciting events. He kept the truth about Dickie’s killer to himself, focusing more on the new arrangement he had with Cold and the confrontation with Augustus.

“Eliza called him, and that fuckin’ rat never said anything,” Maury raged, his cheeks red and blotchy. “All of this time. No wonder they convicted David so goddamn quick, that fuckin’ pig was hidin’ all the fuckin’ evidence!”

“I know,” Jimmy said sadly. “Augustus said he was doing it to protect me.”

“Fuck him, he did it because he was scared of the Luchesis!” Maury argued. “Fuckin’ prick.”

“Do you know who Gregory Rees is?” Jimmy pressed hopefully.

“I know the name.” Maury’s brows furrowed up. “Uh... maybe like, eh, fifteen, twenty years ago. Used to work for the Luchesi family, I know that much. Hadn’t heard anything of him in fuckin’ forever.”

Jimmy frowned, tapping his fingers on the counter. “So, no clue what he would have to do with my mom’s murder?”

“Nope,” Maury replied with a shrug. “Sorry, kid. I think he used to do pickups at the jewelry store when it was still a front for scrubbin’ money, but I don’t think Eliza would have known him.”

“Well,” Jimmy paused, trying to get his thoughts together, “do you remember anything about the robbery? The one at the jewelry store the night my mom died?”

“Not much,” Maury said with a regretful frown. “Busted in quick, knew what they were looking for. They were in and out. Thank God Eliza had already gone home.”

“But it happened after she died?”

“No, it happened before,” Maury corrected stubbornly. “They got the fuckin’ time all fucked up because the alarm was tied in with the phone. Phone went out, times all reset.”

“You’re sure?” Jimmy blinked, his heart starting to flutter.

“Positive. I know it was before your mom was killed because I remember bein’ so thankful she was safe at home. Not that home ended up being any safer... Eh... Look, it was definitely before she died.”

“And what was taken?” Jimmy’s heart started thumping faster.

Maury’s face scrunched up as he racked his brain. “Ehhh, fuck, kid,” he sighed. “I dunno. I know it was only one thing missin’ ‘cause I do remember the owner was rantin’ about having to replace the door all ‘cause of that. Uhhh... shit.”

“Come on, Maury,” Jimmy pleaded. “This could be really important.”

“Fuck. Sorry, kid. I gots no clue.”

“It’s okay,” Jimmy said with a weak smile. “I guess it doesn’t really matter. I mean, Cold says he knows who did it.”

“Right,” Maury said cheerfully, “and he’s turnin’ the screws on Augustus to get your old man free, right?”

“I still haven’t figured out how. He’s made some crazy deal with Augustus, and it’s all going down at his birthday party on Friday. I have to wear a wire and oh! That reminds me. Cold told me to get a receiver.”

“For what?”

“For receiving... wire... things?” Jimmy said helplessly. “Augustus is giving us the wire, and I guess Cold wants something for us to listen in on without Augustus knowing.”

“Why are you wearing a fuckin’ wire? Ain’t your ass just gonna be up there singing?” Maury blinked.

“I have no idea. But Augustus agreed to it, so I guess it’s all part of Cold’s big plan.” He pouted. “I just wish he would tell me what he’s up to. All the Gentlemen know what’s going on. Even Augustus!”

“Maybe he’s tryin’ to protect you. Or he ain’t tellin’ you so you don’t blow it.”

“Rude. I mean...” Jimmy fidgeted. “I guess subterfuge isn’t exactly one of my best skills?”

“Jimmy, you can read your fuckin’ mug like a book. Like, one of them board books for little babies with the pictures.”

Jimmy stuck out his tongue in protest.

“Look,” Maury said, leaning back against the counter, “I’m still in fuckin’ shock Cold gave you a clean slate. He sure as fuck didn’t do that just ‘cause he likes the way you suck dick, okay? You mean somethin’ to him.”

“Yeah?”

“If he ain’t tellin’ you, there’s probably a good ass reason,” Maury continued. “He ain’t gonna do nothin’ to hurt you. And fuck, if he does, it’s wrinkly ball time.”

Jimmy groaned, scrubbing a hand across his face as if he could rub away the awful mental image those words conjured up. “Thanks.”

“Hey, I love you, kid,” Maury said with a small shrug. “I hope this all works out, and I can shake your old man’s hand again. I really do. And you’re really happy with ol’ Boss Cold?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy replied, unable to resist a bashful smile. “I really am.”

“Just keep your nose clean and stay out of his business,” Maury warned. “Still gotta make a lawyer outta you some day. An honest one. Jimmy Poe, the world’s first honest lawyer.”

“Ha, ha,” Jimmy drawled, “very funny.”

“I’m a fuckin’ riot, I know,” Maury snickered. He sighed heavily, heading back behind the counter as he said, “Hang tight, I’m gonna get you that receiver.”

Jimmy waited patiently, surprised when Maury brought back the device and set it down in front of him. “That’s it?”

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s just...” Jimmy picked it up. The receiver was roughly the size of a handheld radio, although there were more knobs and the speaker was larger. It was heavier than it looked. “It’s little?”

“Hey, that’s modern tech for you,” Maury said with a smirk. “Everything’s all super compact and shit now. You could put this little baby right in your pocket, nobody’d ever know. There’s even a plug for some headphones.”

“Cool.”

“Hey, kid.” Maury cleared his throat. “You gotta pay for that. I ain’t running no charity here.”

“How much is it?” Jimmy asked mournfully. Damn, why didn’t he ask Cold for any money?

“More than you can afford,” Maury teased. “Tell you what, since we’re such good friends and all, how’s about I make you a little deal since you seem so into ‘em?”

“Oh, God. What?”

“Take the receiver, lemme keep all your shit you’ve pawned. I can finally sell that bullshit, and you won’t owe me a dime.”

“Maury, I know there’s interest,” Jimmy said with a surprised blink. “I owe you a lot. Like, so much.”

“Take the fucking thing, and let me do something nice, okay? You don’t need any of that old shit anyway since you’re sittin’ pretty with Boss Cold.”

“Thank you, Maury,” Jimmy laughed, beaming happily. “Okay, there might be one more thing I wanna get back.”

“Are you really that attached to your fuckin’ toaster?”

“No, my records. They were my parents’, and you know...”

“Fuck, that’s the only shit you ever pawned that might actually be worth anything,” Maury cackled.

Jimmy gave Maury his best puppy dog impression, batting his eyes and pleading, “Pretty please?”

“Fuck, okay, just quit makin’ that face!” Maury disappeared into the back briefly, bringing out a large paper bag filled with old vinyl records. “Anything else, your majesty?”

“No, this is great,” Jimmy replied with a grateful smile. “Thank you, Maury. Look, I gotta get to work, but—”

“Go on,” Maury said gruffly, waving his hand dismissively. “Just keep me posted, okay? Be careful. Don’t wanna read about you in the papers.”

“Oh, Anna wouldn’t actually write anything—”

“I’m talkin’ about the obits, kid,” Maury said seriously. “Please, take care of yourself, okay?”

“I will,” Jimmy promised, shaking his friend’s hand before departing. Jerry was there, waiting patiently to open the limo door for him.

On the ride over to La Belle, Jimmy flipped through the records with a big smile. He didn’t know if Cold would appreciate the massive amount of AC/DC, but it would be fun to listen to a few of the albums together.

He shivered a little when he thought about their last encounter involving a record player, blushing when they pulled up to the club. Leaving the receiver and the records in the limo, he thanked Jerry and headed inside, noting that the club was suspiciously vacant. Rowena should be here, he thought, glancing around. He wondered if she was in the office and started to head up the stairs.

Jimmy paused, hearing something.

Rowena was crying.

Sighing, Jimmy hurried up to the door, his chest heavy with worry. He didn’t want a repeat of last time he found her in this office, and he had honestly hoped that his friend was feeling better since they talked.

“Rowena, are you...?” Jimmy began as he stepped inside, freezing in place and staring dumbly at the unbelievable sight in front of him.

Rowena was definitely crying, but these were cries of pleasure. She was sprawled out across the desk, her skirt hitched up around her hips. None other than Dario Romero was there on his knees between her thighs and clearly hard at work.

“Jimmy?” Rowena groaned, lifting up her head to glare at him. She waved dismissively and snapped, “Get out! We’ll be downstairs in a minute!”

“God! Sorry! Sorry! I didn’t see anything! Dario’s head is in the way! Uhm, hey Dario, good to see you! Okay, bye!” Jimmy babbled a mile a minute, struggling to get back through the door and slam it closed behind him.

He hurried downstairs, finding Jerry at the bar, who gave him an odd look for being so distressed. Jimmy shook his head, saying firmly, “Do not go up there.”

Jerry didn’t ask for any further detail.

“Is it too early for a drink?”

“Never, *monsieur*,” Jerry assured him, quickly whipping up a batch of appletinis.

“You’re amazing, Jerry,” Jimmy said happily, taking a long sip. “How did you know? This is my favorite.”

“It’s my job to know,” Jerry said mysteriously, winking slyly. “And *Mademoiselle* Legrand told me.”

“Here’s to Miss Legrand,” Jimmy laughed, holding up his glass in a toast. He finished his drink and had started on a second one when Rowena and Dario finally came downstairs.

Dario’s right arm was in a sling, and he looked like he had just survived a tornado. He had the most blissful expression on his face, waving happily at Jimmy. “Hey, dude!”

Rowena’s lipstick wasn’t even smudged, smiling sweetly at Jimmy and teasing, “Hey, sweetie. Mmmm, sorry about that.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Dario said with a blushing grin. “We were just, you know, uhm, talking, and then the talking... became not talking.”

Jimmy was so happy for them, gushing to Rowena, “So, I take it you, ahem, told him?”

“I told him everything,” Rowena said with a big smile, batting her eyes at Dario. “He said I was like Xena, Warrior Princess, taking out all the douchebag trash.”

“As if I wouldn’t still freakin’ adore this woman for doin’ something like that,” Dario said dreamily. “I mean, come on. She’s a goddess.”

Rowena giggled and kissed Dario’s cheek sweetly.

“I take it the, uhm, shoulder is feeling better?” Jimmy asked.

“It’s getting there,” Dario laughed, wiggling the fingers of his right hand. “No surgery thankfully, just lots of physical therapy. I should still be able to play. We only got a few more days until the big party, gotta get our shit down.”

“It’s gonna be a hell of a party,” Rowena said.

“You know, don’t you?” Jimmy accused. “What your brother is planning.”

Rowena smiled innocently, batting her eyes. “Mmm, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Can’t you please tell me? I really—”

“Jimmy,” Rowena cut in firmly, reaching out and taking his hand. “Trust in my brother. Everything is going to be okay. Your dad, the Luchesis, all of it. It’s all going to work out, I promise.”

“And hey, in the meantime,” Dario piped up, smiling brightly, “we got a show to get ready for!”

Jimmy gave an obedient salute, cheering, “You got it! Let’s do this!”

Jimmy and Dario practiced under Rowena’s watchful eye, taking small breaks for Rowena and Dario to passionately make out and occasionally discuss adjustments to the songs.

Politely turning his head when they got a little too heated, Jimmy just smiled. He was happy for them. Rehearsal ended early, and he wasn’t the

least bit surprised. He shook Dario’s hand, teasing, “Try not to overdo it, okay?”

“I make no promises. I am doing to do whatever that woman tells me to do.”

“Well, have fun. And hey, thank you,” Jimmy said, gently pulling his friend in for a hug. “For everything.”

“Hey! Thank you,” Dario gushed. “Rowena told me that you guys talked, and well... I’ll happily get shot any time if it means getting that lady, okay? She’s worth, like, getting shot a hundred times.”

Jimmy couldn’t argue with that, watching the two of them hurry back upstairs into the office, giggling and grinning like kids. They were adorable together, and it was only then that Jimmy realized he hadn’t seen Rowena drinking.

He smiled warmly, overjoyed for his friends. Jerry took him back to the estate, Jimmy peering out the window as they pulled up. He got a glimpse of one of the patrolling men with his dog when Jerry parked up front. It was so surreal that this place was going to be his home now.

Cold was grateful for the receiver and delighted by the records. He was more than happy to add them into his collection, and Jimmy loved how their lives were slowly blending together.

He went to bed that night in Cold’s arms again, and even though he woke up alone like so many times before, Jimmy was content.

The next few days leading up to the party were strangely calm. Jimmy rehearsed at the club with Dario, and he always remembered to knock before entering the office now. Cold took private meetings and made lots of phone calls. He still would say nothing of his plans, soothing Jimmy’s worries each evening before they went to bed.

*Everything is going to be okay, trust me*, he would say. Jimmy was certainly going to try, but he couldn’t help but feel a flicker of panic fluttering away in his gut.

Thursday had arrived, and Cold surprised Jimmy late that evening by taking him back to the hotel they had first stayed at together. He didn't know why they were spending the night there, but Jimmy felt an odd sense of comfort coming back to this familiar place. He flopped on the bed as soon as they arrived, stretching out with a cheerful grin.

"Home, sweet home," Jimmy sighed.

Cold snorted, hanging up a few things in the closet and setting down the small overnight bag he had packed for them. "Missed this, have you?"

"It's kind of romantic," Jimmy teased. "This is where we spent our first night together."

"It's for our protection," Cold said dryly. "We'll be back home tomorrow."

"Protection from what?" Jimmy rolled over onto his stomach, tracking Cold's movements with his eyes as he moved around the room.

Cold didn't answer, replying instead, "I brought that red suit for you. I'd like you to wear that tomorrow at the party."

"Protection from what, Rod?" Jimmy pressed.

"I expect that tomorrow morning you'd like to visit your father before rehearsal," Cold continued as if they were having an entirely different conversation. He sat down at the desk as he had all those nights before, leaning back in his chair.

Jimmy groaned loudly, mumbling, "Yes, I would. I'd also like for you to tell me what's going on."

"No," was Cold's simple reply. He had brought his briefcase, pulling out his ledgers, and it gave Jimmy the oddest feeling of *déjà vu* to watch him put on his glasses and begin to write.

They had come so far in such a short amount of time, their relationship so intense and passionate now. He could have never imagined this was where they'd end up when he spent the night here for the first time.

He now knew that the man sitting there wasn't just a heartless gangster. He was kind, generous, and fiercely loyal. He could be gentle as well as

ruthless, cruel and adoring, and Jimmy loved him completely.

Even when he was stubborn.

Jimmy knew pushing Cold for an answer was pointless, huffing and rolling over with all intentions of ignoring him for the rest of the evening. He couldn't sit still for very long though, maybe only a few minutes, and then he suddenly remembered something about the last time they had stayed here.

"Hey, I love breakfast, I really do," Jimmy said quickly, "but if you order room service tomorrow, I just want pancakes."

Cold laughed, snorting, "You didn't enjoy your buffet?"

"Lola, the nice lady who brings the food? Always got freaked out trying to carry everything up here on time because you ordered the whole menu," Jimmy chuckled. "Why did you do that anyway?"

"Because I didn't know what you'd like," Cold replied with a small smile, closing the ledgers and standing up to stretch.

Jimmy smiled in return, glancing over at the clock. It was a few minutes after midnight now; he grinned wide as he sprang up to his feet to pounce Cold as he came around the desk.

Cold blinked in surprise, but allowed Jimmy to hug his neck, gently resting his hands on his waist.

"Happy birthday to you," Jimmy sang, kissing Cold's cheek. "Happy birthday to you!" He kissed the other. "Happy birthday, dear Rod... happy birthday to you!"

Cold looked faintly amused, teasing, "Are you done?"

"Just wait until the show. You're gonna freakin' love what I'm gonna sing for you."

"As long as it's better than that," Cold snorted dryly.

"Rude!" Jimmy scoffed, playfully batting at Cold's shoulder.

Cold laughed, a pure and genuine smile lighting up his entire face and making all the years fade away.

“You’re so beautiful,” Jimmy couldn’t help but say, feeling Cold tense when he did and seeing his upper lip curled as he sighed haggardly at the compliment. “Why do you always make that face when I tell you that?”

“Because that’s not how I feel,” Cold replied thoughtfully. “That’s not what people think when they see me, when they see my body. Even you.”

“Rod,” Jimmy protested, “I’ve always thought—”

“Do you remember the night you met my sister here?” Cold asked suddenly.

“Yes?” Jimmy frowned, unsure what Cold was getting at.

“The look on your face when you saw Rowena’s scars for the first time,” Cold said softly. “I didn’t want you to look at me that way.”

“Rod,” Jimmy murmured. “I’m so sorry. I don’t want you to think... Honestly. Seeing hers, seeing yours. They’re not ugly; it’s what put them there that’s so fucking ugly.”

Cold’s lip twitched.

“When I first saw them, I was so shocked because I couldn’t imagine the kind of pain that caused scars like that,” Jimmy said, his hands slowly moving to the buttons on Cold’s shirt. He began to carefully unfasten each one, watching Cold’s face for any signs that he should stop.

He saw none, but still he hesitated going further, asking quietly, “Can I please touch you? Please? Let me show you how beautiful you are.”

Nodding and gazing longingly over Jimmy’s lips, Cold’s eyes darkened. His hand curled around Jimmy’s neck, squeezing softly as he let him open up his shirt.

Jimmy ran his fingers over Cold’s marred skin, so grateful to have this privilege. He admired every tear and wound, old and new, leaning forward to kiss each one. He gasped when Cold’s fingers suddenly wove into his hair and tugged hard. Feeling his insides quivering, blood rushed to fuel the passion building between his legs.

Cold smirked; that damned beautiful smirk. He pushed Jimmy to his knees, starting to unbuckle his pants as he purred, “Well... it is my birthday, isn’t it? Go on and show me, Mr. Poe.”

“Yes, sir.”

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# Chapter Twenty-Four

Jimmy woke up to the warm and wonderful smell of pancakes, rolling over to see Cold letting Lola into the room. She was nervous as always, quickly getting the tray of food set up from her cart. Cold had only ordered two dishes of pancakes this time, and Lola smiled at Jimmy appreciatively.

Cold sent her on her way, sitting down on the edge of the bed to eat. He had already dressed, but his jacket was hanging on the back of the chair at the desk. He reached behind him, grabbing Jimmy's foot and giving it a playful tug. "Hungry?"

"Always," Jimmy laughed, wiggling out from beneath the blankets to join him. He leaned close to steal a kiss, murmuring, "Happy birthday."

"Thank you. Mmm, I have a feeling it's going to be a very exciting birthday."

"Still not going to tell me what you're planning?"

"No."

Jimmy rolled his eyes, munching on his pancakes with a mournful pout.

"Jerry will drive you to see your father," Cold said between carefully cut bites. "Afterwards he'll bring you back here to get ready. Detective Duplin will meet us at the club to place the wire before you start the show."

"I really do wish—"

Cold silenced him with a kiss, letting it linger until Jimmy was gasping and flushed. "Trust me," he urged, lightly touching Jimmy's neck.

"See, now that's just not fair because when you do that? My brain like, turns off, and then all I can think about is sex."

"Good," Cold chuckled, kissing Jimmy's brow before rising up to his feet. "Go see your father. I'll be waiting for you at the club. You need to be there by five o'clock, so keep track of the time. Don't be late."

"Visiting hours are only until two."

“Are they now?” Cold said mysteriously, winking playfully as he fetched his jacket. “Jerry is waiting for you downstairs. Enjoy yourself, Jimmy.”

Jimmy quirked an eyebrow as Cold left him to ponder whatever the crap he meant by that. He finished eating and got dressed, riding the elevator down to find Jerry.

Arriving at the prison after a quick limo ride, Jimmy went to sign in at the front desk as always. He was surprised when the guard led him not to the normal visiting room, but another part of the prison he had never been in before. He was brought to a small room, his jaw dropping when he saw his father sitting in front of him at a table.

“Dad!”

“Jimmy!” David exclaimed, quickly getting to his feet and dragging his son into a big hug. “Oh, my God! I should have known it was you! They said my lawyer was coming, wow, I can’t believe this!”

Jimmy could feel tears stinging his eyes, glad the guard had left to give them privacy, burying his face into his father’s chest. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been able to give his father a hug. “I can’t believe this! This is, this is great!”

“I can. I think your new boyfriend has some good friends in the prison.”

Jimmy blanched, stuttering, “M-my boyfriend?”

Giving him a knowing smirk, David teased, “Didn’t take long to hear all about Boss Cold’s young, handsome kept boy. Ahem. There was also an unusually high donation made to my commissary account and all of the Gentleman family here have been extra friendly.”

“Uh... surprise?”

“Christ, son,” David laughed. “This is why you didn’t want to tell me about him last week?”

“Uhhh... yeah.”

David gestured for Jimmy to sit down with him. “I can’t say I approve exactly, but it seems things are going better than you expected. So tell me,

son. Are you happy?”

“I am,” Jimmy gushed. “There is so much more to him than just being a crook, you’ll see. He is so kind, and he’s so good to me. I mean, hell, arranging this? So we can actually really see each other?”

“No more inch of glass between us,” David agreed with a warm smile. “I definitely appreciate it. Everything he has done has made my life here much easier. And you do seem very happy, son. I noticed the new threads, guessin’ those are from him?”

“He’s been taking great care of me,” Jimmy said, eager to give his father a good impression of Cold.

“I’m allowed to be cautious. I am still your father.”

“You know, you’re actually taking this really well,” Jimmy said skeptically.

“Jimmy,” David drawled, “I’ve been in prison for almost twenty years with all kinds of people. Being a criminal... is complicated. People aren’t always black and white, especially when they have a record.”

“Don’t worry,” Jimmy said. “You’ll be able to decide for yourself soon.”

“Oh, will I?” David laughed. “You and your gangster boyfriend gonna bust me out of here? Prison break, eh?”

“Not exactly, but you see, Cold thinks he knows who killed Mom.”

David’s face dropped. He closed his eyes firmly, asking as calmly as he could, “Does he now?”

“Yes,” Jimmy confirmed. “Augustus lied about the case because the Luchesis threatened Anna. He hid evidence, like, it’s... it’s crazy.”

“Tell me about it, son. We got some time.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess we do,” Jimmy said with a big smile. They had the whole afternoon together, and he spent the next few hours catching David up on all the incredible adventures he’d been having with Cold. He tried to make sure he only told stories that highlighted his boyfriend’s kindness and not the darker side of him.

Letting Rowena take him shopping? Good.

Breaking Corman's nose? Bad.

Through it all, David was cheerful but quiet. He seemed to be reserving judgment, and for that Jimmy was grateful. When the discussion finally shifted back to the case of his mother's murder and Augustus' treachery, Jimmy watched all the joy bleed right out of his father's face.

"It's okay, Dad," Jimmy insisted, hugging him close again. "We're going to get you out of here. Augustus is in a corner. He has to help us or Cold will make sure he's right in here with you."

"And to think," David said quietly, "all of this time, Augustus has probably been terrified for Anna."

"What?"

"All these years, probably still afraid the Luchesis would one day come after him and tie up loose ends," David went on. "That they might try to hurt his daughter. No wonder he sent her so far away for college. He wanted her to be safe."

"That still doesn't make it right," Jimmy protested. "That phone call—"

"Son, I'm not saying what Augustus did was right. Not at all. I'm angry, I am deeply angry and hurt that Augustus did something like that. But." He held up his hand. "As a father that would do anything for their child and let the world burn to save them? I understand."

Jimmy was humbled by his father's kind heart. His shoulders sagged as he murmured, "I guess."

"Hey, if you ever have kids, you'll understand," David chuckled warmly. "Now, I'm not saying that me and Augustus are gonna go have a cup of coffee if Cold can actually get me out of here. I'm more likely to punch him right in the mouth. But, hey, I get it."

"I love you, Dad," Jimmy sighed, giving him another hug. He couldn't get enough of them. "You are too good for this world."

“Love you, too. And you know, not that I haven’t been having a great time, but uh, what time did you need to be gettin’ ready?”

“Uh, I gotta be at the club by 5:00?” Jimmy looked around for a clock, squeaking when he saw it was three-thirty. “Holy crap! We’ve been talking for like four hours!”

“Good conversation makes the time fly by?” David suggested, squeezing Jimmy’s shoulder. “Be sure to tell your boyfriend thank you for me. Letting us visit like this, no time limit? Definitely took some string pulling.”

“He can be very persuasive,” Jimmy said with a blushing smile. He stood up, pulling David with him to hug him one more time. “God, this feels so good. I’ve missed you so damn much, Dad.”

“I’ve missed you, too, slugger. I love you. So very much. I’m proud of you, always have been.”

“I’ll get you out as soon as I can.”

“Love you,” David said again with a sad smile, kissing Jimmy’s hair lovingly before finally letting him go and knocking on the door to let the guards know they were ready.

“Love you, too,” Jimmy replied, beaming happily when the guard came to lead him out. He didn’t understand why his father seemed upset at the end when this day had been fantastic. Maybe he just didn’t want to get his hopes up about being freed, but Jimmy was absolutely floating. He was so happy, wishing he could bottle up this feeling and hang onto it forever.

Jimmy definitely had some ideas on how to show Cold just how grateful he was, but first he had to get ready for the big party. He found Jerry snoozing in the driver’s seat of the limo; he lightly tapped the glass and waved.

Sleepily rolling down the window with a gentle smile, Jerry asked, “Good visit, *monsieur*?”

“Awesome visit. A little too awesome because now I think we might be running a little tiny bit late.”

Jerry sat up immediately, leaning over and opening the passenger side door. “Not on my watch, *monsieur*. Get in and strap in.”

Jimmy obeyed, barely clicking his seatbelt into place before Jerry took off, tires squealing. He almost puked once or twice, and he was pretty certain he had whiplash when they pulled in front of the hotel.

“Run like the wind, *monsieur*!” Jerry ordered, shooing for Jimmy to get out of the limo.

Bolting to the elevator and panting on the ride up, Jimmy hurried into the hotel room, stripping as he stumbled to the closet to grab the red suit he knew Cold liked so much. He was still buttoning his shirt when he left, trying the elevator and pounding at the button impatiently.

He couldn’t wait any longer, groaning as he opted to take the stairs. Skipping down them two at a time, Jimmy was full-on gasping by the time he stumbled back into the passenger seat beside Jerry. He grinned breathlessly, wheezing, “Okay! Ready!”

He must have looked a fright because Jerry stared at him in bewilderment. “We will fix you at the club.”

Jerry drove them over at less whiplash-inducing speeds, though the tires complained a bit when he finally parked. He ran around to intercept Jimmy as he climbed out, instructing him to hold still.

Jimmy froze as Jerry expertly adjusted his shirt and jacket, fixing his tie and hair. He gave him an approving nod, saying with a satisfied smile, “Ah, la perfection. Now go!”

“Thank you,” Jimmy said. “Thank you so much! You’re really the best, Jerry!”

“Eh, I know,” Jerry sighed with a casual shrug as he followed Jimmy inside. “It’s a burden I have to bear.”

The club was freshly cleaned and there were huge arrangements of calla lilies on every table. Rowena was directing staff everywhere, barking orders like a drill sergeant.

“Make sure all of those flowers are perfect! I want the front tables pushed together, the whole family is sitting there!” Rowena was snapping. “Please,

pretty please make sure those bottles of champagne are chilled and ready to go or I will scream!”

“Hey, Rowena,” Jimmy said shyly.

Rowena whirled around to face him, glancing at her watch, grinning as she said, “Ah! Right on time!”

“Is, uh, Cold here yet?” Jimmy asked nervously.

“In the office with, ahem, Detective Duplin,” she replied, dropping her voice down to imitate her brother’s tone when she said Augustus’ name. “Go on up, and when they’re done with you? Come see me.”

Giving a quick salute, Jimmy headed up the stairs to the office. Out of habit now, he knocked.

“Come in,” came Cold’s familiar drawl.

Jimmy stepped inside, finding Cold seated at the desk with Augustus standing in front of him, arms crossed and glaring.

“Hey,” Jimmy squeaked.

The tension was heavy and palpable.

“It’s time,” Cold said briskly, all business as he nodded at Augustus.

Augustus approached, at least saying a quick hello before he held out a small black disc. “This is it,” he said, “We’ll just tuck this in your jacket pocket, okay? I’ll be able to hear everything in about twenty minutes, so you know, keep it clean.”

“R-right,” Jimmy stammered, fidgeting as Augustus fixed the device inside of his inner jacket pocket. It didn’t look like much despite its importance.

“I don’t suggest listening in for the next ten minutes or so,” Cold taunted, “unless you’d like to hear a private performance from Jimmy, he really has quite a voice...”

Augustus stared Cold down while Jimmy flushed, saying flatly, “I’ll be waiting for you. Good luck. To both of you.”

“Can’t wait,” Cold said, fixing Augustus with a nasty smile. He watched him leave the office without another word, visibly relieved as he rose up to properly greet Jimmy.

As Cold pulled him close for a tender kiss, Jimmy’s entire body became pudding in his strong embrace. “Mmm. Hi.”

“Hi,” Cold chuckled, his thumb tracing along Jimmy’s jaw. “I trust you had a good visit with your father?”

“Amazing, thank you,” Jimmy replied earnestly. “It was an awesome surprise. We had a really good time. He was so happy, and told me to tell you thank you, too. Thank you so much for setting that up.”

Cold shrugged indifferently, saying, “It was nothing.”

“Seriously,” Jimmy said, leaning in to press a kiss to Cold’s cheek, “it meant a lot to me. It was so sweet. Thank you.”

For a brief moment, Jimmy could have believed he saw Cold blushing. The gangster smirked, running his fingers through Jimmy’s hair as he said, “Almost show time.”

“What do I need to do?” Jimmy asked eagerly. He was wearing a wire now, stupidly excited as he was suddenly starring in his very own crime drama.

“All I need you to do is perform beautifully, wear this ring, and meet me in the dressing room immediately afterwards,” Cold said firmly as he pulled out the Luchesi ring from his pocket.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Cold confirmed, smirking at Jimmy’s pout as he slid the ring onto his finger. “Don’t look so disappointed.”

“Fine,” Jimmy lamented. “I guess I need to go get prepared? Throw some things? Be a diva?”

“If you’d like,” Cold chuckled, giving him another kiss. “Mmm, let’s go.”

Cold led him downstairs to Rowena, who barked some more and dragged Jimmy backstage to go over the set list one more time. After that, it was

really a game of trying to stay out of the way as everyone continued to prepare for the big night.

The club finally opened and the band began playing as guests filtered in. Jimmy hadn't seen Dario yet and peeked out from behind the curtains to see if anything interesting was going on. There were four large tables all pushed together right at the front of the stage, the Gentlemen occupying almost every seat with Cold sitting in the middle.

He couldn't quite make out what was happening at the front of the club, but as far as he could tell everyone was being thoroughly searched. A new group of suited men had appeared, slick and predatory, their eyes stalking across every inch of the room. Jules guided them in, seating them at a bunch of tables to the left of the Gentlemen.

"Luchesis," Dario's voice suddenly hissed beside Jimmy, making him jump.

"Shit! Be easy, man!" Jimmy laughed nervously. "Where have you been? Wait, is that lipstick on your neck?"

"Probably," Dario replied with a blushing smile. "Rowena needed to uh, relax for a few minutes."

"Say no more," Jimmy chuckled, peeking back out to the audience. "Seriously, those guys there. Those are the Luchesis?"

"Yup. The tall one in the blue? That's Matteo Luchesi. And oh, look who's with hanging out with them."

A new figure had appeared, sitting proudly with the Luchesis.

Rufus Corman.

"That freakin' traitor. He really is working with the Luchesis! What are they doing here?" Jimmy wondered out loud.

"Ha, Cold invited them!"

"Wh-what? Why!"

"I am not about to try and understand the inner workings of your man's brain. That's just what Rowena told me."

“The crap, man.”

“Worry about it later,” Dario soothed, patting Jimmy’s shoulder. “You ready for the show?”

“Ready,” Jimmy said with a quick nod.

Dario took his place on stage, and Jimmy began to walk out toward the microphone with a sly smile. He didn’t worry about gangsters or murderers; when he was on stage, all he had to focus on was the performance, the music, the songs.

Taking a cleansing breath and smiling lovingly at Cold in front of the stage as applause lightly erupted around the room, as soon as Dario hit his cue, Jimmy began to sing. His body moved with the music as he guided the band through Sinatra’s ‘The Way You Look Tonight.’ They had agreed it was easier to use some songs they had already performed previously, following that up with another riveting rendition of Halsey’s ‘Hold Me Down.’

Cold was just as captivated as before, only looking away once when Jules came to whisper something in his ear. He glanced over at the Luchesis and nodded, his eyes snapping back to Jimmy on stage in a heartbeat.

Next was one that Jimmy was a little nervous about, Patsy Cline’s ‘Crazy.’ He tried to capture the same sorrow and beauty as he had heard when Suzanne sang it, pouring his very essence into each word. Dario joined him on the piano here and there, but for almost all of the song it was only Jimmy’s voice that rang out through the club, clear as a bell and strikingly haunting. He had barely finished the last few words before there was an adoring round of applause, and he offered the audience and Cold a blushing smile.

Cold’s face was nearly unreadable, but Rowena had leaned close and pressed a comforting kiss to his cheek. He casually wiped his eyes, brushing his sister aside with a quick smile.

Jimmy felt proud for having moved his icy boyfriend so, grateful that the last song was a bit more cheeky and uplifting. He heard Dario’s nimble fingers stroking the keys, quickly saying into the microphone, “This song is for a very special birthday boy... hope you like it.”

Cold blinked at the direct dedication, all the Gentlemen exploding into laughter and cheering for their leader as the band joined in for the song.

“I need a gangster,” Jimmy purred the opening words of the song, sultry and passionate. The words spoke of the need for a gangster, for a man that could love him better than anyone else. It would be a love that could survive anything, through thick and thin, and there was simply no one else who could satisfy him.

Pressing a hand to his forehead and glancing up at Jules and Rowena, Cold actually looked embarrassed. Jules was cheering, and Rowena was up on her feet, whistling as Jimmy held a note and Dario banged away on the piano. Valdemar hollered too, and Thirdsies pounded the table doing his own drums as Jimmy went on.

Jimmy drawled all of the words seductively, snatching at his bow tie and pulling it loose as he sang. Sliding his hands down his body, he smiled suggestively as he emphasized all the colorful sexual innuendo of the song.

Cold’s eyes never left his, whatever awkwardness he felt over such a tongue-in-cheek choice consumed by an obvious hunger.

By the time Jimmy began belting the final chorus, losing himself to the words and singing directly from his soul, all the Gentlemen were on their feet. Cold hadn’t moved, still seated, but he was leaned forward across the table, completely entranced.

Jimmy held the final note to deafening applause, grinning as he saw Cold rise to his feet to clap for him. He was smiling so warmly, prouder than Jimmy had ever seen him. Jimmy blew him kisses, taking a bow. He stepped back behind the curtains as the applause fell, exhaling sharply. Glancing curiously down at the little wire in his pocket, he hoped it hadn’t been disturbed during his performance.

Dario came over to shake his hand, cheering, “Hell of a show, man!”

“Hey, you, too! Thanks so much!” He clapped Dario on the back, making sure to avoid his injured shoulder. “I’ll see you in a bit. I’m gonna take a breather.”

Heading back to his dressing room as Cold had asked him to do, he plopped down at the vanity with a big smile. He could almost forget that his lover's enemies were here, or that there were cops crawling around somewhere outside.

While he'd been singing, it was just him and Cold. It had been so beautiful.

Reality wasn't as nice.

Jimmy heard a knock at the door and called out politely, "Come in!"

"You were magnificent," Cold purred as he walked in, a giant bouquet of red roses in his arms.

"Oh, my gosh," Jimmy gushed, quickly standing up to intercept the flowers. He took them graciously and kissed Cold with a big smile.

Holding his neck, Cold deepened the kiss for a long moment. "Mmm. Absolutely spectacular. Singing 'Gangsta' to a gangster? Cute pick."

"Thank you," Jimmy laughed, momentarily forgetting all about the world outside this room. He held the flowers close, lost in Cold's passionate embrace. He almost didn't notice the door opening again, blinking when he heard an unfamiliar clicking sound.

Pulling back from Cold, Jimmy gasped when he saw Rufus Corman standing there with a gun pointed right at them. The sound had been the hammer pulling back, Corman leering at them both.

"How did he get a gun in here?" Jimmy hissed, clinging to Cold fearfully. "I saw everyone being searched!"

"Mmm, I have my ways. Now, I'll be taking that ring, thank you," Corman said sternly, smiling wide.

Cold was eerily calm, facing Corman and pushing Jimmy behind him. "You mean the ring you took from Rafaello Luchesi after you killed him?"

"That would be the one," Corman snorted. "Always were clever, Cold. I've been looking for my little trophy for quite some time, and I'd like to finally have it back, please."

Jimmy's eyes widened at the confession as pieces began to fall into place, pushing his way in front of Cold as he started to shout, "You! It was you! You killed my mother!"

Cold jerked him back, but Corman's aim was now focused on Jimmy.

"All she had to do was give me the ring," Corman snarled, his lip curling in annoyance, "but then she just wouldn't stop fuckin' screaming."

Jimmy thought he might throw up, his vision starting to get hazy as the panic set in. He fought it with all of his strength, determined to keep pushing. He knew Augustus was listening in, and whoever else had that extra receiver. "You killed the Don, and then my mother? But why? Why kill her? She didn't do anything wrong!"

"Oh, yes, she did," Corman hissed. "She recognized the ring when I brought it to the jewelry shop to get it resized. She knew it was Don Luchesi's. Apparently, she was the one who did the engraving, isn't that fun? She threatened to call the cops, so I left."

"But you went back," Jimmy said slowly, more of the pieces clicking together. "You're the one that broke in, looking for the ring." That had to be the one missing item from the night of the robbery, it had to be, but it was long gone when Corman went looking for it. "Mom knew you'd come back for it, so she took it home."

"Good thing her address was on file at the store," Corman said with a roll of his eyes. "Too easy to find her. Shame about your daddy and the cops showing up. Didn't have a chance to get the ring... or you."

"Why kill her over a fucking piece of jewelry?" Jimmy demanded passionately. He had waited a lifetime for answers, tears racing down his cheeks as he screamed, "She was a beautiful and kind woman, a mother, a wife! Why? Why did you do it?"

"It's not just a ring, you fucking simpleton," Corman scoffed. "It's a symbol. Why do you think I was going to get it resized? I was going to wear it and rub it all in their fucking faces."

Jimmy couldn't stop his tears, his mouth twisting up in anguish. The very ring on his finger was what had cost his mother her life. She had tried to do

the right thing and died for it. She had to have realized that Corman had no good reason to have that particular ring, and she had called Augustus to report her suspicions. She'd had no idea Corman was going to show up at their door. She had no clue Jimmy would see a white blazer and think it was his father's coat.

Fuck. Fuck all of it. That tiny chunk of metal and rock was what stole his mother away from him.

Jimmy wanted to throw it away, destroy it, melt it into nothing. Shove it down Corman's throat and watch him choke on it.

No, he had to let him keep talking. Augustus was listening. They had to keep Corman talking no matter what. This had to be part of Cold's plan. It just had to be. This is what would free his father.

"I'd spent years serving the Italians and kissing that fucking thing," Corman was still ranting away. "It was finally going to be mine, all fucking mine, along with the kingdom of Strassen Springs. And it will be, now hand it—"

"You killed the Don to start the war," Jimmy snapped in realization. Even as upset as he was, he knew he needed more. He had to keep going. "You knew his sons would fight over who was going to lead! Just like now, you were trying to start a war between the Gentlemen and the Luchesis—"

"Shut up, fuckin' Scooby Doo," Corman snapped. "You think you're so clever putting all of this together? Ha! But the joke's on you. Both of you. Especially you, Cold, you fucking cock-gobbling prick."

"Oh, that really hurts my feelings coming from a cowardly busted little cunt," Cold said smoothly.

"Fuck you," Corman spat, leveling the gun at Cold. "I've spent months planning this. I have the Luchesis all behind me... they're eating out of the palm of my hand. Who do you think gave me the gun? Huh?"

"The Luchesis who don't know you killed their father yet," Jimmy mumbled, clinging to Cold's arm.

"You know," Corman said with a languid sigh as his eyes hunted over every inch of Jimmy's body, "I had so much fun sticking it to your mom all those

years ago... I would love to know what it would be like to stick a few things in you. Ruin that pretty face—”

Cold lunged forward, the barrel of the gun hitting his chest as he bared his teeth, snarling, “You will not fucking touch him.”

“Tough talk coming from a dead man,” Corman sneered, grinning wildly. “I have been waiting for this... for so long.”

“Ungrateful waste of flesh,” Cold drawled in disgust, his icy eyes sparkling with his fury. “I was good to you, I took you in, I took care of you. I made you a Gentleman.”

“You treated me like a fucking child!” Corman roared back, slamming the gun against Cold’s chest. “I’m done with you! I’m fucking done with your condescending bullshit! I’m smarter than you, and I’ve finally fucking won!”

“Well,” Cold said calmly, “I guess that means you’re out. And when you’re out... you’re out.” He raised his hand, index and thumb in a mockery of a gun aimed right at Corman’s head. He smiled softly and whispered, “Bang.”

Corman looked confused and angry, growling, “Rot in hell, Legrand.”

“You first.”

Corman pulled the trigger.

Jimmy’s chest violently convulsed, screaming, “No!”

Nothing happened.

The gun didn’t fire. Corman’s eyes bugged out of his head, and Jimmy thought he was going to faint, as Cold grinned.

Collapsing against the vanity as Cold lunged forward to grab the gun, Jimmy’s knees had turned into jelly. Cold cracked the weapon against Corman’s face, watching with unbridled satisfaction as he crumpled to the floor.

“The gun...” Jimmy gasped, trembling all over.

“Funny thing about guns,” Cold said, smirking smugly as he pressed the heel of his shoe against Corman’s throat. “If you want to kill someone...” He pulled out the clip, grinning slyly. It was empty. “They require ammunition.”

Corman’s nose was bleeding, the man gurgling and glaring up as Cold dropped the gun down beside him. “How? Fucking how?”

The door of the dressing room opened suddenly, and in walked Matteo Luchesi. He had the receiver from Maury’s pawn shop in one hand, a gun in the other.

Jimmy was pretty sure that one was loaded.

“Ring,” Cold said, reaching back to Jimmy.

Jimmy’s hands were shaking too badly.

Cold gently reached for him, taking his hand and carefully working the ring off his trembling finger while grinding his foot down on Corman’s neck.

“Matteo,” Corman gasped, “I didn’t—”

“Shut up, Corman,” Matteo snapped. “I heard everything.”

Cold offered the ring out to him, smirking down at Corman. “Tough break.”

Handing Cold back the receiver, Matteo took the ring, smiling at it adoringly. It was obvious that it meant a lot to him. He nodded at Cold, saying, “Thank you for this,” then looked down at Corman in disgust. “You’re such an arrogant fool. Never even thought about checking the gun I gave you to make sure it was loaded.”

Cold took his foot off Corman’s throat and put the receiver in his pocket. He pulled Jimmy into his arms, a firm hand at his neck and at the small of his back.

“This is not fucking over!” Corman roared, his eyes wild and glaring. “Matteo, please, listen to me—”

“No more,” Matteo cut him off. “Not another word from that poisoned tongue of yours. This is for my father, you fucking piece of shit.” He aimed his gun.

Jimmy couldn’t tear his eyes away, watching Matteo aim right for Corman’s forehead.

Cold grabbed Jimmy close, pressing his face against his chest and hissing quickly, “Don’t look.”

Jimmy closed his eyes, and Matteo fired, the shot ringing in Jimmy’s ears. He couldn’t hear, everything was muddled and weird. The gun kept firing, and Cold was pulling Jimmy out of the dressing room and dragging him away. Jimmy never looked back. He never saw Corman’s body, but he didn’t need to. Cold was leading him down the narrow hallway that exited out the back of the club.

Leaning heavily against Cold, Jimmy’s legs felt weak. Cold guided him through the door, nearly running right into Augustus and several SSPD squad cars. Jimmy started crying, the adrenaline making every inch of his body shake.

It was over. Corman was dead.

“Got everything you need?” Cold asked briskly, eyes locking with Augustus’.

Augustus looked as if he had seen a ghost, but he nodded. He carefully removed the wire from Jimmy’s jacket, saying, “We heard it all. We’ll contact the DA tonight. David Poe is an innocent man, and we’ll get him out as soon as we can. I’ll make sure the courts put a rush on it.”

Jimmy sobbed harder, clinging to Cold tightly. His father was going to be free. After seventeen years, his father was finally going to be free.

“And Matteo Luchesi?” Cold went on.

Augustus turned to the officers behind him, all in full battle gear, giving them a thumbs up. They started rushing the back door. “About to be arrested for the murder of Rufus Corman. I don’t suppose you’re going to explain how Matteo happened to hear everything?”

Cold shrugged, innocently replying, “Perhaps he had his ear pressed against the door.” He turned his head slightly when he heard a distant barrage of gunfire. He smirked, saying knowingly, “Guess we’ll never know.”

There was static on Augustus' radio, a tinny voice whispering, "Target was hostile and armed, team leader. Target is down, securing the area."

"Roger," Augustus radioed back.

Jimmy kept his teeth together, but his eyes were wide with shock. He was completely amazed. He had known Cold was smart, but this was incredible.

Cold had planned all of this. Every last step. Corman was dead, Matteo was dead, and they had all of the evidence to free his father from prison.

"If you'll excuse us, Detective," Cold purred as he cradled Jimmy close, "I'd like to finish celebrating my birthday."

Augustus glanced at the two of them warily. "I'll be in touch." He looked at Jimmy, his expression grim as he added softly, "Jimmy..." He was clearly struggling to find the right words.

Jimmy smiled through his tears, saying, "It's okay, Augustus... just... help my dad?"

"I will. I swear it."

Jimmy stepped forward, taking a deep breath and hugging Augustus tightly. He remembered everything he and David had talked about today, and he knew Augustus had suffered so much, too. He felt Augustus' arms awkwardly come around him before squeezing tight and giving him a proper hug back.

"Thank you, Augustus," Jimmy said.

"Thank you, Jimmy. I'm... I'm so sorry."

"I forgive you," Jimmy said immediately, hugging him hard. "It's okay, I forgive you."

Up the alley came a very familiar limo, Cold giving Jimmy a small nudge. "Have a good night, Detective," he said, leading Jimmy away from Augustus and toward the car. "Try not to make a mess when you raid the rest of my club."

Cold swept Jimmy into the back of the limo and held him close. He sacrificed part of his tender hold to pick up the phone, quickly instructing,

“Everything is fine. Take us home, Jerry. *Merci*.”

“This was your plan,” Jimmy said quietly, wiping his face. “You set Matteo up... you knew Corman was the murderer. But how?”

“He made that remark about you being blond at Tamerlane’s party,” Cold replied. “I thought it was strange, but I didn’t think anything of it until I saw your photograph. Then I realized he couldn’t have known what color your hair was unless he’d seen you as a child. The night he killed your mother.”

“And Gregory Rees?”

“Gregory Rees is Rufus Corman,” Cold explained, kissing Jimmy’s forehead. “An alias.”

“Aren’t the Luchesis going to be mad you got Matteo killed?”

“Why? Corman was obviously working with the police and betrayed us all. He was the one wearing the wire,” Cold said flatly.

“He wasn’t... oh.”

“Now you’re catching on.” Cold chuckled.

“How could you be sure Matteo would give him an unloaded gun?” Jimmy asked quietly. “What if he’d tried to betray you?”

“Jules gave Matteo the guns,” Cold snorted. “The first one, the unloaded one, he put in his jacket when he searched him. The second one, the one that had ammo, Jules didn’t give to him until after I came backstage to find you.”

“You really thought of everything,” Jimmy said with a strained smile.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you,” Cold said, his voice taking on a soothing tone. “I couldn’t let Corman know what I was planning. He could not suspect it was a trap. I needed your response to be real.”

Jimmy pouted at all the deception but nodded, saying quietly, “It’s all really over now?”

“Yes,” Cold promised, kissing his forehead sweetly.

“And my dad is really getting out?”

“*Yes*.”

“Thank you,” Jimmy sighed adoringly. “Thank you for everything. I’m... I think I’m in shock. I just can’t believe it. This is real. This is really happening.”

“Mmm, believe it,” Cold purred, smiling slyly.

Jimmy closed his eyes, letting himself relax against Cold. His heart was full, he was exhausted, and he had never been happier. He reached for Cold’s hand, lacing their fingers together.

Cold gave Jimmy’s hand a gentle squeeze, leaning his cheek against his hair.

“I love you,” Jimmy whispered softly.

Icy eyes flickering over Jimmy’s face, Cold muddled over those words thoughtfully. He didn’t say anything, but he smiled, warm and sweet. He leaned in to kiss Jimmy tenderly, and Jimmy melted against him.

“You know... it’s still technically your birthday,” he mumbled over Cold’s lips. “Just saying.”

“Mmm. I suppose there is one last present I’d love to open up.”

“I’m all yours.” Jimmy smiled brightly.

“And this,” Cold said softly, guiding Jimmy’s hand to his chest, over his heart, “this is yours, James Poe.”

Jimmy was already so emotionally compromised that Cold’s unexpected declaration was nearly enough to break him. He was tearful in moments, kissing Cold frantically, hands roaming as he gasped, “I’ll take it.”

Cold easily took control of the kiss, forcing Jimmy to slow down, take their time. He kissed him sweetly, passionately, and purred contently, “Mmm, thought you might be interested. Pretty fair trade.”

Jimmy actually laughed, grinning from ear to ear as he teased, “Sounds like a hell of a deal to me.”

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# Chapter Twenty-Five

“Are you ready, Mr. Poe?” Cold asked quietly, his hands tracing over the ropes that held Jimmy in place.

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy whimpered, already eager and desperate.

Cold had soft ropes tying Jimmy’s hands behind his back, thoughtful twists that held his wrists together just above his ass. The ropes looped between his legs, around his cock and balls, hugging his thighs. They were then woven down into a special bar that kept his knees firmly apart.

To open a present, it first had to be unwrapped, Cold had told him firmly.

When they first arrived back at the estate, all of the Gentlemen were waiting for them to celebrate. Being in on the plan had allowed them to escape the police’s raid on the club totally unscathed.

Rowena had brought Dario, the pair looking rather cozy snuggled up on a sofa, earning themselves a nasty glare from Cold. Rowena didn’t look bothered, though Dario was clearly nauseous.

Perhaps Cold was in a good mood from their victory because he didn’t say a word about it. He didn’t even say anything about Tamerlane and Lorre being tangled up by the bar, torn between shoving each other or kissing, much less distracting than the shocking sight of Thirdsies and Pym passionately making out on one of the other sofas.

Jules had his cell phone out, mumbling something about giving the Doc a call and left with a determined smile on his face.

Valdemar had been watching everyone with a longing grin, tipping a drink back and laughing, “Ahh... young love.”

Cold finally had seen enough when Thirdsies started biting Pym’s neck and threw his glasses behind the sofa. He left Valdemar to his voyeuristic intentions and whisked Jimmy away to their bedroom, stripping him down and worshipping every inch of him as he looped all the ropes around his body. Every knot was tied with a kiss, fingers lingering to caress every bit of skin as he went.

Jimmy was now currently posed on the edge of the bed, Cold admiring his handiwork with a smug chuckle. Jimmy bowed his head, blushing fiercely as he felt the tip of Cold's finger slide between his cheeks.

"You do look so lovely like this," Cold praised. "A perfect little present just for me..." He spread Jimmy's cheeks, massaging around his hole with his thumb.

Jimmy's hands wiggled against the ropes, wishing Cold would give him more, give him something. His cock was stiffening quickly, the rope suddenly feeling tighter, making him groan.

"Not too much?" Cold asked, sliding a hand around to check the fit of the rope.

"Good, sir," Jimmy replied quickly.

Cold gave him a firm stroke as a reward, going back to playing around the edge of his hole.

Jimmy had lost all sense of time as Cold teased him, gasping when he finally pressed the tip of his finger inside. Cold held it there for a breath, but pulled away again.

Cock twitching in protest, Jimmy pouted.

Cold reached into the bedside table, humming lightly to himself. Jimmy heard the click of a lube bottle and sighed happily. But Cold wasn't done torturing him, simply swirling the lubricant around between his cheeks and still not penetrating him.

Jimmy whined, his hips pushing back. "Please."

"No," came Cold's firm reply, his palm cracking across the tender flesh of Jimmy's ass. "You should be happy I'm touching you at all. Maybe I should leave you like this, watch you squirm for a little while."

"Please, sir," Jimmy gasped, his cheek left stinging from the rough spanking. "I promise... I'll be good."

"We'll see," Cold snorted, his fingers returning to spread Jimmy's cheeks wide, thumbs digging and massaging at his taint and around his hole.

Jimmy bowed his head down in submission, letting himself collapse against the bed with his ass still up in the air.

“There...” Cold purred. “Just like that... Yes, be good for me.”

“Yes, sir,” he whimpered, the ropes still tugging all over.

Like an answer to his prayers, Cold’s fingers began to slide inside of him. Gentle at first, but then rougher, deeper until Jimmy was crying out from the stimulation. His nails dug into his palms, grunting when he felt Cold pressing in a third finger to make him moan louder.

“Look at you,” Cold praised as he opened Jimmy up. “Your little hole is so hungry, hmm?”

Clenching down around Cold’s fingers, Jimmy whispered brokenly, “Yes, sir... God... I want more...”

“Tell me what you need, Mr. Poe.”

“Your cock, sir.”

“Mmm, I don’t know if you deserve that yet,” Cold said, leaning down and spitting lewdly on Jimmy’s hole. His fingers swirled around in his own saliva before plunging back inside Jimmy.

Jimmy whimpered, groaning when Cold’s fingers twisted and pressed against his prostate, causing him to shudder all over. “I’ll be good, so good,” he swore, wiggling against the rope.

It was driving him crazy not being able to touch, completely at Cold’s mercy. He was desperate and wrecked, trying to be good, but loving every second of the beautiful torture. The thrill of being denied made every sensation hotter, and he gasped when Cold’s fingers plunged so deep Jimmy would swear he was trying to fit his whole hand inside.

The feeling was intense enough that Jimmy’s head came up off the bed, his hands curling into fists as he cried out, “Fuck!”

“There,” Cold soothed, twisting his fingers and forcing Jimmy to squirm and sob. “Such a good boy...”

Panting hard, Jimmy gritted his teeth and took it all, his toes curling as he writhed.

Cold finally released him from the intense pressure, withdrawing his hand and leaning down to softly kiss his cheeks. Whining at the sudden contrast of sweet affection, Jimmy let his head flop back down against the mattress. He smiled when he felt Cold's tongue press into his stretched hole, grateful for the warm and slippery feeling working around his tender flesh.

"Mmmph, God, yes," Jimmy moaned, having to call on every drop of patience not to tilt his hips back and fuck himself on Cold's probing tongue.

Cold was making love with his mouth; long, passionate licks punctuated by wet kisses and deep thrusts, all designed to make Jimmy fall to pieces.

Jimmy's cock was so hard he could feel his pulse pounding away at the base of his shaft and in his balls. Smothering his face against the sheets, he gave himself over to every wonderful swipe of Cold's nimble tongue.

The pressure building inside him was beyond intense. He thought he could almost come from this, feeling sweat beading all across his body, with Cold's breath making his overheated and sensitive flesh tingle.

Jimmy wanted to thrust his hips, grind his aching cock down into the mattress, anything to get friction. But no, he had to wait. He had to be good. All he could do was whine and babble nonsense about how good it felt, how much he loved it, how it was like being in freaking heaven.

Cold kept him strung right on the edge for so long that Jimmy was dizzy when he finally stopped. Cold checked the ropes again, his long fingers lovingly teasing over Jimmy's cock. "You always get so wet for me, Mr. Poe."

"It feels good, sir."

Cold reached into the bedside table once more, and soon, Jimmy felt the familiar cool texture of silicone press against his hole. The pressure was tolerable, but couldn't be ignored, making Jimmy groan as he felt a plug slide into place.

But no, this was something new, something bigger than ones they had used before, and what was that thing in Cold's hand? Jimmy heard an odd click and the plug began to vibrate, eliciting a shameless moan from his lips.

Cold chuckled happily, very pleased with himself.

When the vibrations started up again, Jimmy groaned long and low. They were slow at first, then suddenly pulsing and more intense. They would pause and start again, Jimmy squirming and crying out from the wonderful sensations.

He hadn't even noticed Cold moving onto the bed in front of him, quick fingers pulling at his hair and lifting his head up. Right in front of his face was Cold's thick cock, a breath away from his lips.

"Suck my cock, Mr. Poe," Cold ordered, his hand firmly at the base to spare Jimmy a few inches. "Maybe if you do a good job, I'll fuck you."

Opening his mouth, Jimmy whined in want of the warm taste of flesh and salt, eagerly sucking as hard as he could. Cold kept pushing, letting him take as much as he wanted down to his fingers. Jimmy was soon drooling, gagging a little and writhing as the vibrations in his ass grew even stronger.

Cold fucked his face slowly, fingers still tangled tight in Jimmy's hair as his hips thrust forward. He would turn the vibrations down to give Jimmy a quick reprieve before cranking them back up and choking him with his cock at the same time.

Savoring every moment, Jimmy's body was on the verge of collapse when the vibrations reached their peak, and Cold pushed his cock even deeper down his throat. Jimmy loved Cold using him like this, making him gag and whimper, his skin hot and stinging all over as the temperature inside him climbed higher and higher.

"Good boy," Cold soothed, adjusting the vibrations to a low level and pulling his cock away.

Jimmy gasped, blinking past his tears and smiling up at Cold. "I was good?"

“Mmm, very good,” Cold confirmed, lovingly wiping Jimmy’s drool from his chin. “Any better and I would have come already.”

Jimmy’s chest surged with a rush of pride. He opened his mouth instinctively as Cold rubbed the head of his cock over his lower lip, teasing him with a quick taste.

“Mmm, not yet,” Cold said. “I much prefer to come inside you... would you like that, Mr. Poe?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy pleaded eagerly. “Please.”

Cold smirked, tapping his cock one more time against Jimmy’s mouth. “Wait right there for me...”

“Yes, sir.”

Cold slid off the bed, coming around behind Jimmy to release the spreader bar from between his knees. He sat back against the headboard as he lubed up his cock, reaching for Jimmy, since he still couldn’t move well with his arms tied.

“Come here. In my lap, your back to my chest.”

Jimmy eagerly crawled over as best he could, Cold’s strong arms helping him get into the position he wanted. He sat, knees bent with his feet flat on the bed. He felt a little like a frog sitting like that, grateful for Cold’s grip holding his arms so he didn’t teeter forward.

“Perfect,” Cold praised, reaching down between Jimmy’s cheeks to slowly remove the vibrating plug. He set it aside to clean up later, lifting Jimmy’s hips and teasing at his hole with the head of his cock.

“God...” Jimmy whined, his head tipping back at the beautiful torture.

Groaning appreciatively, Cold slowly began to let Jimmy ease down on his thick cock.

Jimmy cried out louder and louder until Cold was fully inside of him, panting as he sat all the way down, full and aching wonderfully. “Fuck... it’s so good.”

Holding onto his wrist tightly, Cold pushed Jimmy forward. If he let go, Jimmy would topple onto his face, but he trusted him, gasping at the stretch as Cold shifted beneath him. This angle felt amazing.

But Cold was enjoying himself too much to start moving yet, holding Jimmy's ropes and using his other hand to slide along the curves of his body. He raised him up a little bit, enough to feel around Jimmy's stretched hole where his cock was filling him up.

"Beautiful," Cold whispered, admiring the tight fit.

"Thank you, sir," Jimmy panted.

"Because you've been so good, I'm going to fuck you, but first I want to see how much you want it. Start fucking yourself on my cock. Use those gorgeous legs of yours. I won't let you fall."

Jimmy nodded, flexing his thighs and slowly lifting himself up, letting his body drop back down on Cold's cock. He gasped at how deep it felt this way, adjusting his feet to give himself more leverage, slowly starting to bounce up and down.

Groaning with every slam, Jimmy would swear Cold's cock was going right through him. The ropes pulled against every inch of his body, restricting him from being able to fully move or stretch and really get into it.

He pushed himself as hard as he could, thighs burning, his aching cock bobbing as he rode Cold. He wanted to go faster, wanted to feel the burn, but Cold grabbed him by his throat, soothing, "Easy, Mr. Poe..."

Jimmy tried to slam his hips down, tried to chase that sweet ache, but again Cold stopped him. He squeezed Jimmy's neck until he gasped, pulling him backwards against him. Jimmy had no choice but to collapse onto his chest, crying out as Cold's other hand snaked around his body to lightly stroke his cock.

"I told you to be easy," Cold warned, his hand at Jimmy's neck pressing down so hard that it made him grunt.

"I want you," Jimmy begged, broken and damp sounding. "I want your cum, sir."

“Be good for me and you’ll have it,” Cold assured him, drawing his knees in and bracing his feet against the sheets, while lifting Jimmy up to begin lovingly thrusting into him.

Jimmy went limp in Cold’s arms, his legs like noodles as they stretched out, spreading them as wide as he could. Leaning his head back, he pressed his mouth against Cold’s in a breathless kiss. “I love you. Fuck, I love you so much.”

All efforts to maintain a patient rhythm fell away at those sweet words, Cold kissing Jimmy with a frenzied passion, fucking him hard and fast. He growled, cradling the back of Jimmy’s head as he pushed his tongue deep into his mouth.

Jimmy squealed, his screaming muffled and desperate as Cold pounded into him, barely able to keep their lips together for needing air. “Oh, God, oh, fuck, fuck, fuck,” he chanted, his fingers clawing at the fabric of Cold’s shirt, toes tightening up as he squirmed.

Cold squeezed Jimmy’s cock, stroking him and panting, “Gonna fill you up, Mr. Poe. Would you like that?”

“God, please,” Jimmy begged, feeling his body crawling to the sweet edge of oblivion. He wanted to leap so desperately, crying, “Please, please, can I come with you?”

“Yes,” Cold hissed between tight teeth, his furious pace faltering, as he groaned. “Come, Jimmy... come with me...”

Jimmy couldn’t hold back, too weak, orgasming the moment those words left Cold’s lips. His eyes closed, and he screamed as his cock shot all over his stomach and thighs.

Cold’s cock slammed harder with Jimmy clamping down on him. He growled low as he found his own end, holding Jimmy close, fingers clawing as he spilled inside of him and jerking his head around for a messy kiss.

Letting Cold handle him however he wanted, Jimmy whimpered as his orgasmic joy quickly turned into snug discomfort. He grunted, whining when Cold’s hips finally stilled. “Fuck...”

Cold took a long and deep breath, before going back in for another passionate kiss, his hands adoring Jimmy's entire body. "Exquisite," he purred, carefully moving to start untying the ropes.

Jimmy was exhausted, sweaty, and completely satisfied. And sore. Mmmph. He shuddered as Cold lovingly pulled all the ropes away, groaning as he was gently laid down and missing that thick cock inside of him already. He pouted but couldn't keep from smiling when Cold started cleaning him up.

Gently massaging his hands to make sure they were getting proper blood flow, Cold kissed Jimmy's wrists where the ropes had left marks. He kissed each of his palms as well once he was satisfied, bowing his head and starting to lick Jimmy's stomach clean.

Jimmy blushed from all the attention, watching his boyfriend lap up every drop. He whimpered when Cold's tongue ducked down between his legs to get a taste of himself.

Jimmy was a perfect and happy puddle, smiling when Cold went off to get a damp cloth to make sure he was cleaned up properly. "Mmmph, that was... amazing," he sighed happily.

"Good?" Cold smiled warmly as he washed Jimmy's lean body.

"Oh, so good."

Cold nodded, cleaning up the last of the mess, then stepping briefly back into the bathroom. Jimmy was happy to see him fully stripped down when he came out to join him in bed.

Eagerly moving the covers back, Jimmy waiting for Cold to stretch out before pouncing. He burrowed against his side, mumbling happy little sounds as Cold curled his arm around his shoulders. Gently resting his hand on Cold's chest, he toyed with his hair before gliding up along his collarbone.

Cold's eyes started to close, allowing Jimmy to explore all he wanted, pulling the blankets up around him as he got ready for sleep. He looked peaceful, decades younger.

"You know what?" Jimmy said, peering at Cold's gorgeous face.

“Mmm. What?”

“I’m really glad you didn’t let Jules burn me,” he teased, grinning playfully.

Cold barked out a short laugh. “You know I wouldn’t have let him burn you. Much.”

“Much, he says,” Jimmy snorted.

There was a long pause, so long that Jimmy thought he had fallen asleep. “For what it’s worth... I’m sorry,” Cold said softly, his eyes opening to look at Jimmy.

Jimmy lifted up his head in surprise, smiling adoringly at his lover. “Hey, it’s not exactly the story you wanna tell your kids about, but everybody has to start somewhere.”

Cold didn’t say anything, only smiled, his fingers lightly tracing over the remaining impressions from rope left on Jimmy’s wrists.

Hooking his leg over Cold’s thigh, Jimmy snuggled closer. He let his eyes slowly shut, listening to his boyfriend’s breathing. While their start was quite unconventional, Jimmy wouldn’t change a thing, knowing that it all led to this moment.

He was so happy. His father was going to be free soon, and he was in love with a gorgeous and kind man, who was also a severely complicated and ruthless gangster, but hey, no one was perfect.

In his mind though, here in this bed, Cold was pretty damn close.

“I love you,” Jimmy said quietly as he began to drift off.

Cold kissed his hair, carefully lacing their fingers together and giving them a gentle squeeze.

Jimmy liked to think that was Cold’s way of saying it back, falling asleep with a smile on his face.

* * *

When he woke up, he was happy to find Cold still in bed with him, though he had been pushed almost to the edge of the bed from Jimmy's aggressive snuggling. Jimmy also realized he had been sleeping sideways, his arms still around Cold but his long legs kicked out across the bed.

Cold was already awake, eyes heavy from sleep, but instantly alert when he saw Jimmy stirring. "Good morning."

"Mmm, good morning," Jimmy mumbled, rolling over to relinquish his monopoly of the bed. To his delight, Cold moved with him, his strong arms curling around his waist as he kissed his shoulder. Jimmy could also feel Cold's hard cock digging in against him. "Mm, *very* good morning."

Cold smirked, trailing kisses down Jimmy's shoulder. "It's about to be."

Jimmy groaned as Cold's wet fingers pressed into him, making the way for his cock to slip inside. Cold's arms wrapped around Jimmy, slowly connecting their bodies and rocking into him, happening only too easily after how stretched Jimmy had been last night.

Tangling his fingers with Cold's, Jimmy grinded back against him. It was slow and beautiful, and he let Cold set an intoxicating pace, adoring how he could feel his bare flesh against him. Jimmy enjoyed the ropes, the toys, the torture; he loved it all.

But this, making love with nothing between them except a mere breath of space, hearing Cold whisper, "Jimmy," in his ear, he loved most.

Cold moved them as the temperature heated up, putting Jimmy on his back and mounting him. Jimmy groaned as Cold's cock slid back home inside of him, using his long legs to pull Cold in by his hips and dragging him down for a kiss.

Drunk on his sweet lips, when Jimmy finally came, he screamed out to the heavens in pleasure. Cold was right behind him, groaning and cursing as he pounded them both through every tremor. Even when their bodies had stopped shaking, Cold sighed and slid his cock in and out a few more times, chasing the last inklings of pleasure.

"Yup," Jimmy agreed, picking up their conversation as if they'd never stopped. "Very good."

Cold laughed, kissing Jimmy's forehead. "Very," he confirmed, pulling Jimmy out of bed and to the bathroom for a much needed shower. Cold didn't dress in a suit for the day, opting instead for optimum relaxation by selecting a pair of blue silk pajamas.

Jimmy was still only wrapped in a towel, smiling as he watched Cold get ready. "Gonna go be a badass gangster in your jammies?"

Cold snorted. "I'm always a badass gangster, thank you very much. And today, I am going to be badass in my pajamas. I've earned a day of rest."

"So, big ol' Boss Cold wants to... chill?"

Eyes twinkling as he laughed, Cold said, "It's not a bad idea. We've got snow place to go."

Jimmy giggled. "Oh, that was terrible."

"Hmmph. Clearly, you don't know the frost thing about such highbrow humor."

"You're awful."

"Aw, gonna give me the cold shoulder now, Jimmy?"

"Okay, seriously. Where has this ridiculous dorky sense of humor been hiding?" Jimmy laughed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Oh, it's been around," Cold assured him, smirking playfully and leaning in to steal a quick kiss. "Get dressed. I'll see you downstairs."

Jimmy found a pair of sweatpants and a plain white shirt, brushing his teeth and grinning at himself in the mirror. Life was pretty damn good.

He floated down the stairs to the kitchen, all smiles. He could hear Jules and Jerry fighting in a mixture of volatile French and English, while Cold snickered to himself as he sipped a cup of coffee.

Jerry had already begun to fix plates, waving his spatula at Jules and screaming at him as he tried to steal a handful of bacon.

"I don't even care what you're saying! Voo-juhhhh-whatever!" Jules roared back. "Don't fuckin' care! I've got a fuckin' date tonight, and you're not

gonna ruin my good mood!”

“Date?” Jimmy gushed excitedly, sitting down next to Cold and thanking Jerry for the food.

Jerry mumbled something in French, continuing to stir at the eggs still in the pan.

Jules looked proud, beaming, “I was finally successful in wooing Doc Queen, and now she’s gonna go on a real fuckin’ date with me.”

“You mean she felt sorry for you and agreed to one date if it meant you’d finally leave her alone, you uncultured twat,” Jerry sneered, angrily scooping eggs onto Jimmy’s plate.

“Someone is fuckin’ jealous,” Jules hissed triumphantly as he snatched another piece of bacon. “That the better man won.”

Speaking rapidly to Cold in French, Jerry gestured clearly to Jules while he finished serving their food.

“Ah, *je connais*,” Cold sighed, waving as if to dismiss Jerry. “*Aller*.”

“*Merci*, *monsieur*,” Jerry replied, huffing as he stalked out of the kitchen.

Jules chuckled heartily, giving Cold and Jimmy a big grin. “Now, the better man is gonna go get ready for his fuckin’ date. You good, Boss?”

“Very good,” Cold replied, smirking. “Hope you two kids have a lovely time.”

“See ya later!” Jules said cheerfully, then waved at Jimmy. “Bye, Twig!”

“Bye, Jules,” Jimmy replied through a bite of eggs. “What was that about?”

“They’re both admirers of our dear Madeline Queen,” Cold said, vying for more coffee instead of actually eating. “That’s what they always fight about. And Jerry is very disappointed that Jules was successful where he was not. And a bunch of other things about Jules’ questionable genetics.”

“How many languages do you speak?” Jimmy asked.

“Mmm, four,” Cold replied with a shrug as if it was nothing to be excited about. “English, of course. Italian, French, and some very poor Russian.”

“I always thought French was a very beautiful language,” Jimmy gushed, leaning close. “It doesn’t matter what you’re saying. It just sounds so pretty.”

“Mmm... *Je suis ammanchee comme un taureau*,” Cold purred delightfully.

“See? No clue what that means, but it sounds beautiful.”

“*Je veux te lécher des hanches jusqu’aux pieds*,” Cold kept on going, his eyes roaming over Jimmy’s body hungrily.

“Okay, pretty sure that one was dirty,” Jimmy giggled, laughing louder when Cold scooted closer to him.

“*Je bande pour toi*,” Cold said seductively, waggling his eyebrows playfully and moving in to kiss slowly along Jimmy’s neck.

“That one was totally and definitely dirty,” Jimmy sighed, eyes fluttering closed and gasping as Cold’s hand grabbed his neck.

Cold pressed their foreheads together, kissing Jimmy with a murmured, “*Je t’aime...*”

“Wh-what does that one mean?”

Cold’s eyes were gentle when Jimmy looked at him, full of light and warmth, his hand softly squeezing his throat as his thumb slid along his jawline. “It means ‘I love you,’ Jimmy.”

Jimmy’s heart stopped, dropping down into his gut. “You... you said...”

“*Je t’aime aussi*,” Cold said quietly, “is how you say ‘I love you, too.’ In case you were wondering.”

“Juhhhh timmm, oh-seee,” Jimmy replied carefully, trying to imitate Cold’s flawless accent.

Cold leaned in for another kiss, gazing at Jimmy adoringly and chuckling softly. “Close enough.”

# The End

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